

## These Games We Play

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## These Games We Play

by [peacewish](#)

### Summary

For the first time in vorns, Soundwave plays a card game and wins a most unusual prize. But according to Jazz, that's when the real game began. Now master and slave must match wits in a game that will push them both to the breaking point and beyond.

### Notes

This entire thing was spawned as a response to this deceptively simple challenge:

G1: Decepticons win. Autobot survivors are scattered. One day, Soundwave is off-duty at a bar-esque establishment. Some minor 'Cons and Neutrals are playing the Cybertronian equivalent of a high-stakes card game for a battered, chained up Jazz. Soundwave includes himself in the game.

Kinks: Cue Soundwave getting an Autobot! I want a twisted courtship and power imbalance. Soundwave tries to win Jazz over, shines him, gives him treats, and generally pampers him. Soundwave is patient: he won't force Jazz, because he knows Jazz will soon see things his way. He's not above giving Jazz a taste of things to come, either, and gives him massages, teases him, and admires Jazz with his hands. Jazz is a tough, noble Autobot and resists giving the interfacing Soundwave wants. But he's still very trapped, and has to cater to Soundwave's lesser whims, like including when Soundwave wants to be pampered in return, or be punished. Jazz can eventually give in completely, or hold out.

## on games

In the end, it took the combined efforts of the twins to tear Soundwave from his work console. He resisted, wanting only to work or, if that was impossible, to hit the berth in deep recharge. The twins, however, won. They were depressed too, all of his cassettes had been hit with the echoes of his frustration and unhappiness, but that only made them more desperate to get him out and interacting with the world again. It was that desperation that convinced Soundwave to finally leave the apartment. His constant brooding hung over his symbiotes like thick, smothering smoke, and it was the least he could do to give them space to breathe. Even if he knew perfectly well that he would not enjoy himself at all.

That was how he'd come to be here, lurking alone in the shadowed recesses of a booth in one of Cybertron's new pubs. The dim lighting did an effective job of hiding him from the other patrons, which suited him fine, because he was nursing a flute of refined energon and mechs always did stare so impolitely when his mask had been removed. He knew many of the mechs here, and those whom he did not know personally, he did know by appearance. Megatron had appointed Soundwave to head his security team, security to Megatron being thorough surveillance of his subjects. Soundwave was very good at his job.

There were even other Decepticons, and those were mechs that everyone knew. Nobody could have missed the noisy flock of seekers when they burst into the bar; certainly the owner didn't. He rushed to greet them personally, kicked a couple of no-names out of the best table for their benefit, and gushed over the favor of their patronage until Dirge told him rather irritably to fetch 'em some drinks already. He bowed and scurried away, and Soundwave watched him program a couple of server drones to cater exclusively to the center table. Seekers were so predictable - what was that old saying about squeaky jets getting all the oil? They did thrive on attention. One of them, he could not help but notice, had even brought along his personal trophy to show off. Skywarp lounged back in his chair, making himself comfortable, before tugging on the chain that linked Jazz's neck to his wrists. He had to do it twice, the second time rather forcefully, before Jazz dropped to his knees by Skywarp's chair. Jazz murmured something that Soundwave could not hear over the noise of Seekers adjusting their chairs, but it made Thundercracker laugh and Skywarp smack Jazz sharply on the head. It hurt to look at, a healthy and living slave, and Soundwave decided this outing was a bad idea after all.

"What did I say about opening your mouth tonight, slave?" Skywarp hissed. Now that they'd all settled in, the words were easier to pick out, and Soundwave's audios were precisely tuned instruments. Even from over here he could hear every word of Jazz's reply.

"Not to do it, because you don't like it when I make you look stupid."

The table erupted in laughter and Skywarp cuffed Jazz so hard he nearly knocked his head against Thundercracker's chair. Jazz rolled along with the force of the blow and in the next astrosecond was sitting up straight again. "Oops, shouldn't have said that part out loud. I am so *very* sorry. Master."

"You'll pay for that one later tonight," Skywarp promised him. "Now keep the vocalizer mute and concentrate on looking good. That's what you're here for."

"Such a task comes naturally to me, master Skywarp. Do *you* have to concentrate on looking good?"

More laughter, another blow to Jazz's head. A flicker of amusement ran through Soundwave. The Autobot was playing a game with his own master, using his razor-sharp wit to counter Skywarp's physical punishment. Judging by the many scuffs and scratches covering Jazz's body, the game had been going on for a while.

"You must really want to get fragged hard tonight," Skywarp muttered, while Thrust dealt the cards.

"If I did, I'd have to ask for some bigger and stronger seeker."

Lots of 'ooh's and commiserating chuckles circled the table this time, and a very exasperated Skywarp hit Jazz again.

"When are you gonna learn, Warp?" Thundercracker chided, optics on his newly dealt hand. "You gotta stop givin' him those openings, it's all he needs."

"I shouldn't have to worry about giving him openings; *I* am the master. *He* is the slave. He should worry about *me* - and he does, every orn once we get home. Ain't that right, slave?"

"Like clockwork, for the entire half-breem," Jazz said promptly, and the others guffawed. This time Skywarp did knock Jazz to the floor. Soundwave watched him brace his hands for a moment, gathering himself, and slowly push himself back up. As he did so, one leg slid back ever-so-discreetly into the path of the approaching server drone. The little wheels checked sharply and its forward momentum tipped it forward, a tray of nicely refined energon splattering all over Skywarp. This time it wasn't just the table that cracked up; the entire bar turned to look and had a nice long laugh at Skywarp's expense. Everyone except the owner, of course, who came galloping over to heap apologies on Skywarp's lap. Skywarp wasn't having any of it, and railed furiously for a solid breem, apparently not considering the possibility of sabotage. Some of the spilled energon had splashed onto Jazz as well, and Soundwave watched him carefully lick his fingers clean. Then, noticed by none but Soundwave, he smiled.

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After that, Soundwave watched the game - both of them - progress well into the night. He declined any more high-grade offered him by the server, preferring to keep his processor clear, and simply did what he did best. That is, watch and analyze in silence. Skywarp, meanwhile, only grew louder and more obnoxious as the breems wore on. Whenever he was unwise enough to say something to his slave, Jazz bounced back a sassy retort that had the other seekers roaring with laughter and Skywarp's fist smashing into his helm. It must have been about midway through the game, with credit chips piling up in the center of the table and three seekers already bowed out, that Soundwave decided he had seen enough. Watching Jazz run intellectual circles around his moronic master was simply painful; such a mind was wasted on Skywarp. Mask firmly back in place, Soundwave stood and approached the table.

"Participation, desired."

Thundercracker nearly spit out a mouthful of energon when they all looked up and saw him. Skywarp's jaw hung open.

"Soundwave. Are you... lost? This is where mechs come to have *fun*."

"Participation, desired," Soundwave repeated coolly. Jazz had looked up along with the rest, but

when Soundwave's gaze moved over him he quickly looked back at the floor.

"You want in on the game?" Thundercracker asked doubtfully. "Really?"

Those sorts of questions never ceased to aggravate Soundwave, though he would not reveal it. Yes, *really*. Twice now he'd stated it. Why would he change his mind?

"Sure, pull up a chair!" Skywarp threw out a jovial invitation before Soundwave had to repeat himself again, grinning most wolfishly. "You'll have to buy in, though, pretty pile of chips we got ourselves here."

"Demand, reasonable." Soundwave sat in the empty chair directly across from Skywarp, accessing subspace for his own credits. Thundercracker looked nervous, and leaned over Jazz's head to whisper. He ought to have known Soundwave would hear him anyway.

"Warp, are you sure? He has the ultimate trabacc-face."

"Only helpful if you actually know how to play," Skywarp hissed. "Six thousand vorns, and when have we ever seen him play a card game? If he wants us to teach him an expensive lesson, who are we to turn him down?"

"If you're sure..."

"TC, I am completely sure. I have never been so sure. You are looking at one extremely sure seeker."

"It's when you're surest that you're usually stupidest," Thundercracker muttered, but shrugged and sat back in his chair. Still looking a bit nonplussed, Ramjet began to deal.

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Three hands later, Skywarp's grin had begun to slip. Soundwave, of course, not only had the rules and common strategies of trabacc committed to deep processor, but also had gathered considerable useful information about his opponents while watching from afar. Ramjet consistently rearranged his cards, bet low, and tapped one pede against his chair leg when he thought he had a shot at victory. Thrust whistled when he was bluffing. Thundercracker's wings twitched when he was nervous. And Skywarp made one strategical mistake after another, to the extent that Soundwave was surprised he'd lasted so long in the game. Either luck was compensating his poor skill by a slim margin, or his competition was just that bad. Probably both. Methodically and unhurriedly Soundwave eliminated every mech from the table in turn.

"Toldja," Thundercracker mumbled, as the defeated Thrust folded his hand and retreated from the table. Skywarp fidgeted in his seat and flashed an indignant glare at Soundwave.

"You're doing this too easily! How do we know you're not cheating, you telepath? Maybe you're plucking our cards right outta our processors, huh?"

"Skywarp, previous experience with telepathy," Soundwave reminded him. "Effects noticeable."

"Yeah, that's true," Thundercracker commented, slurping the last of his energon. "We know what it feels like."

"Way to back me up, buddy."

"Just sayin', we'd know it if he was goin' in there." He tapped a finger against his helm with a resigned air. "I think we're learning why we never see Soundwave play trabacc - no Decepticon is stupid enough to want to play against him."

"Well I'm still going to play," Skywarp huffed, proving Thundercracker's point neatly. Soundwave thought he heard Jazz stifle a snort. "Feel free to quit if your struts can't handle the stress."

"Well, now that you mention it..." Thundercracker dropped his cards to the table and leaned back, luxuriating in a full stretch and ignoring Skywarp's dark look. "What? I want to get out before he wins the wings off my back. Good luck to you, though, buddy. I sincerely mean that."

"Fair weather friends," muttered Skywarp. Fiercely he studied his hand, then Soundwave with narrowed optics, as if he would find any clues there. Soundwave met his stare impassively. He did not even need to look at his own hand; logical elimination of all cards previously deployed this round meant that Skywarp was statistically incapable of holding a hand that could win back the pot. He had, in effect, already lost before the shots could even be fired. His squawk of dismay when Soundwave revealed his hand was almost pitiful.

"That's impossible!"

"Logically inevitable," Soundwave corrected. "Game entertaining; outcome pleasing. Gratitude extended." He reached for the chips and Skywarp made little horrified squeaks.

"W-wait! How about one last round, sudden death face-off? Give me one last chance to win it back, huh? Soundwave... ol' buddy?"

"Skywarp, no remaining collateral to offer. Incentive, nonexistent."

"Uh... I can bet Jazz!"

The Autobot flinched when he was brought into it, then again when Skywarp clapped his hand down over his head. Soundwave didn't spare him more than a glance.

"Slave disrespectful and disorderly. Undesirable."

"Well sure, he lets his mouth get away from him once in a while, but he's fragtastic in the berth. Course I usually have to cuff him to it beforehand, but that's most of the fun. Ain't it, Jazz?"

Jazz jerked his head free of Skywarp's grip. "One would hope so, for your sake. We all know cuffing anyone to the berth is the only way you ever could get laid."

Skywarp glitch-slapped Jazz good and hard, then smiled brightly at Soundwave. "Just needs a few more beatings to knock the attitude out of him, that's all. And you can't deny he's a good lookin' piece of aft. At least worth everything there on the table, if not more."

Soundwave let a moment go by before he nodded his head in assent.

"Wager, accepted. One final round."

They surrendered their cards, and a bemused Thundercracker shuffled the deck. Six cards to each, highest grouping would win the Autobot. Soundwave's hand gave him the choice of a two-card high grouping, or a three-card low grouping. Swiftly his processor ran the statistics, calculated which was most likely to beat Skywarp's offering, and chose the three cards.

"Gentlemechs, display your hands," Thundercracker commanded, with a brief affect for drama, then leaned forward to eagerly peer at both hands. "And the winner is... ooh, sorry, Warp."

Skywarp did not accept his loss stoically. With an abbreviated wail, he dropped his head against the table and banged it there a couple of times. He then directed a vicious but wisely silent glare at Soundwave, before twisting in his seat to glower at Jazz.

"Go ahead, slave. I know you've got a great one ready to spit out; hurry it up before you explode."

Kneeling there on the floor, so vulnerably close to the much bigger and stronger Decepticon, Jazz proved he'd lost none of his panache. He looked up, and smiled.

"I hardly know what you mean, Skywarp. I am sparkbroken that you lost. The fates are against us... *Adieu, mon cherie*, for it was not meant to be."

Skywarp's face twisted into an ugly scowl and he moved to cuff Jazz across the face one more time.

"Jazz, not your property anymore."

It was said by many that Skywarp was a bit thick in the processor, and accurately so. But his reflexes were battle-sharp and more importantly, he had good reason to respect any warning that came from Soundwave. The back of his hand stopped just short of contact, Jazz already visibly bracing himself for the blow. Skywarp looked from him to Soundwave, watching calmly from across the table, then back to Jazz again. When he dropped his hand, his engines let out an indignant huff.

"Fine. Not my property anymore. You want the mouthy groundpounder, you got him. Have fun with your new *master*, Jazz. Do enjoy the mindrape."

Jazz did not so much as twitch, but Soundwave's acute hearing picked up a slight hitch in Jazz's ventilation. Skywarp shoved himself back from the table, making grumbling noise about bad luck, cheaters, and some much-needed high grade energon. Ever good-natured Thundercracker accompanied him to the bar, and that left just the two of them. Jazz was still kneeling by Skywarp's vacated chair, gaze firmly on the floor, though surely he must feel Soundwave's stare. He let half a breem tick by in silence, taking the time to study his new property, before finally standing. Even when he'd come to stand right next to him, Jazz did not move.

"Stand."

For a moment he thought Jazz might refuse. But then he rose silently and smoothly from the floor, the whirring of his fans the only sound he made. Jazz was nervous, and Soundwave had no need of telepathy to know it.

Jazz flinched when Soundwave raised his hand, but was quick to control it. Perhaps he was expecting to be struck again, but Soundwave only brushed his fingertips down the side of his face, tracing some telltale scrapes. Skywarp's handiwork showed.

"All this lookin' gonna go on much longer?" Jazz asked unexpectedly. "Have to charge fifty creds per breem of staring, you know."

Ah. There it was, his cautious first test of a new opponent. Soundwave would have smiled, if he was the sort of mech to indulge in such expressiveness. Instead he took Jazz by the chin and tipped his face up, forcing visor-to-visor contact.

"Skywarp, inferior. Soundwave, superior. Snide remarks, ineffective."

"We'll see," was the prompt reply.

"You will. Walk."

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They walked home. Soundwave could have easily carried Jazz in his arms and flown, but he was not in any particular hurry and the distance not so great. In any case, he wanted the chance to study Jazz while walking. He had a pronounced limp in the right leg, however much he may have been trying to hide it, most likely left over from some romp with the overenthusiastic Skywarp. He was scratched and dented from helm to pede, and showed signs of flagging at the end of a barely three-tek-long walk. Soundwave listened to the unsteady huffing and flowing of air from his vents, along with a few suspicious rattles and clinks, and resolved to make an appointment with Hook. Jazz was practically listing to one side by the time they reached his loft, and Soundwave was keeping half an optic on him as he keyed in the door code, just to make sure he didn't fall right over.

Rumble and Frenzy were, unsurprisingly, exactly where he'd left them - slagging it out over some new video game at the entertainment console. At the whoosh of the opening door, the game froze mid-screen and they twisted around with expectant grins of welcome.

"Hey, boss, back at last! We thought you'd gotten..." Frenzy's words choked off in his vocalizer when he saw Jazz standing in Soundwave's shadow, and his jaw swung open. Rumble's gape was more or less identical.

"Rumble," Jazz greeted, tone cool as night. "Frenzy. How are ya?"

Astonished optics went from Jazz back to Soundwave. "You were supposed to get a *drink*, not another -"

Frenzy elbowed Rumble hard before he could finish his sentence, then pasted a big smile across his face. "Hey, it's Jazz! That's... great, Soundwave, you brought home Jazz. Where did you find him, by the way? Under a wreck?"

"You know I didn't think it was possible," Jazz mused, "but you are actually shorter than I remember."

"Hey, you -"

"Frenzy, contact Constructicon team," Soundwave interrupted. "Schedule maintenance at earliest opportunity. Rumble, collect energon, bring to my chamber. Jazz." That last command he accompanied with a small tug on Jazz's arm, steering him through the spacious front room to the door to his personal chamber. Jazz did stumble a little, but managed to stay upright and keep pace with Soundwave until the door had closed behind them and they were alone again.

"Your arrival, unexpected," he explained. "Cassettes will adapt."

"Unexpected," Jazz echoed thoughtfully. He tilted his head ever so slightly, as if to examine Soundwave. "So, you didn't mean to obliterate Skywarp at a game you never play. It just... happened."

Soundwave met his gaze with a level stare. "Extend hands."

Jazz hesitated, but Soundwave snatched a wrist and pulled his hands closer for inspection. Skywarp had not bothered to hand over the key to Jazz's chains, not that Soundwave needed it. The lock was a simplified copy of Decepticon security codes, most of which Soundwave had designed himself.

He overrode the mechanism in less time than it actually took the latch to tumble, and he relieved Jazz of his chains. The collar around his neck did not come off, and never would. All of the Autobot slaves had been tagged with them; the latches were fused shut, each collar embedded with a tracking device, and a kill function that could zap the Autobot within to a sparking heap for ten joors. All any Decepticon in close range had to do was send a simple ping. Those, also, Soundwave had done his part to design.

Jazz backed up the second the chains were gone, struts tensing nervously as he put more space between them. "So what's the game, Soundwave?"

"Query, not understood."

"Skywarp only takes off the chains when he's in the mood for me to fight back. Is that how you like it?"

He was almost tempted to frown. "Shared proclivities with Skywarp, zero," he informed Jazz, a little frostily, then impatiently turned back to the door and opened it. The twins jumped back, startled, then gave him big sheepish grins. Soundwave plucked the cube of energon out of Rumble's arms, snapped his fingers and pointed back to their video game, and with a slump of the shoulders they retreated. Again he shut the door.

"Refuel now."

He offered the cube to Jazz, who didn't move. "Oh, but I couldn't possibly impose."

"Refuel now. Not a request."

"I said I couldn't," Jazz snapped. "I *can't*, not now. It'll have to wait."

That startled Soundwave into a quick scan. He did not possess instruments of medical detail, but he did understand what Jazz meant. Too long a time of too infrequent - or inadequate - refueling had left its mark on Jazz's internals, shrinking the fuel intake and closing off nonpriority systems. A sudden influx of energon, even this moderate low-grade, would probably be rejected. At full force. Soundwave set the cube on the nearest table.

"Refuel when ready."

This time Jazz nodded. He looked so worn and faded, even in the soft bedchamber lighting, that Soundwave could not blame Frenzy for his earlier remark. Was Skywarp *trying* to kill his slave, or was it simple carelessness? He was not sure which irritated him more. Now this scraped, dented mess of a mech belonged to him.

Jazz flinched, then held himself rigidly still when Soundwave rested a fingertip on his chest. Lightly, oh so lightly, he traced a line up his armor, then over the hard collar. Up along the neck he moved, following a thin and sensitive seam. Jazz didn't move, but his fans were spinning a little harder and he'd shuttered his visor completely. Soundwave outlined his jaw, then up to his forehead, and gently spread his fingertips across the dimmed visor. He might not look his prettiest at the moment, but his beauty was still there. Soundwave could feel it in his fine features, and see it in the way his fists had clenched themselves so tightly. The slave was a proud Autobot still.

"Primus knows I am not a demanding mech, Soundwave," murmured Jazz, when Soundwave didn't



move his hand. "But could you just get it over with already? I am tired, and I need to recharge."

Reluctantly, Soundwave dropped his hand and stepped back. "Exhaustion confirmed. Recharge now."

Jazz's visor snapped back online with a flash. "Come again?"

"Exhaustion confirmed," Soundwave repeated. "Systems overtaxed. Autobot will recharge now." He indicated the berth, noting the baffled surprise so evident in Jazz's expression. He wasn't even trying to hide it, which attested to his fatigue.

"You... want me to? Now?"

"As stated."

Jazz took one look at the berth and pointedly backed into the corner. "Then I'll be fine over here."

"Berth preferable."

"I'm used to the floor now. Skywarp kicks in his sleep. *And* hogs the blanket."

That last part made no sense to Soundwave, but he dismissed it as unimportant. "Berth preferable."

"To which one of us?"

His visor shuttered itself again, indicative of rapidly dropping energy, and it seemed Jazz had to concentrate on onlining it.

"Autobot will learn obedience is inevitable."

A low chuckle reverberated in Jazz's vocalizer. "I'm sure. But the game is just no fun if I don't try to play... at least for a little while. You'll see."

Soundwave was a patient mech, and had had enough of repeating himself that night. He waited silently, rock-still, and watched the glow in Jazz's visor ebb away. His ventilations quieted, growing longer and more even, and at last the spent slave sank into a heap on the floor. Soundwave waited for exactly one breem after that before he closed the distance between them, and scooped up Jazz in his arms. He was far too light. The bot had always been on the small side, but malnutrition had been eating away at the inside of his armor. Gently Soundwave deposited him on his berth, and settled himself at his side. A silent ping brought the lights down to black, but Soundwave could still hear him, still feel his warmth. He lowered his faceplate to the crook in Jazz's shoulder, where he could feel the low pulses of energy circulating within, and shuttered his own visor.

All in all, a very good card game.

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Disclaimer: I do not own theses characters

## ch2 on secrets

Soundwave enjoyed a full recharge cycle that night. He online'd, feeling more rested and refreshed than he had in some time, and immediately noticed two things. One, he was lying alone on his berth. Two, the energon cube was sitting exactly where he'd left it, but it was now half-emptied. Swiftly Soundwave stood and exited his chamber, only to stop short when he reached the front room. Jazz was in the center of it, warily turning around and around so as to keep pace with the circling Ravage. A low, menacing growl welled up out of his vocalizer, optics fixed on the intruder.

"Nice kitty... nice, evil, Decepticon spy kitty," Jazz crooned. Without lifting his gaze from the bared fangs, he raised his voice. "It's about time you woke up. I don't think your pet housecat likes me very much."

"Provoking Ravage, unwise."

"What makes you think I provoked him?"

"Observation, previous interaction with Decepticons."

"Ah. Good point. Are you going to call him off? Ever?"

"Autobot should not have been wandering residence without permission."

"You were in recharge." Soundwave wondered if Jazz was experiencing any dizziness, spinning around like that. His energy levels were back up, but he was still in a weakened state.

"Autobot will remain in berth during my recharge."

"Aw, my mistake. Were you lonely, Soundwave, did you need to cuddle?"

Soundwave gave his silent permission, and Ravage sprang. Jazz didn't have a chance before he'd been knocked flat on his back, pinned under the savagely snarling feline.

Some kind of grunt escaped Jazz when he hit the floor, but otherwise he made no noise. Not struggling in the slightest, he looked at the mouthful of fangs just above his face and smiled.

"Did I push a button?"

Soundwave did not deign to reply. Leaving Jazz trapped under Ravage for the time being, he attended to his energon dispenser for refueling. A datapad was lying beside it, tagged with a memo addressed to him. The twins had already left for their rounds, but Frenzy had left the information for a scheduled appointment with Hook. Soundwave reviewed it and consumed his energon, taking his time doing both. Then he turned his attention back to the pair on the floor.

"Ravage, desist."

Ravage ducked his head, mock-snapping at the air just over Jazz's visor, then obediently bounded off him. Jazz winced when Ravage dug his weight into his body, and sat up rather stiffly. "So where's the rest of the zoo? Should I keep my back to the wall?"

"Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, returning shortly. Will not attack unless provoked. Recommendation, don't."

Jazz smirked. "You have so little faith in me, Soundwave."

"Appropriate address, master."

Jazz tensed, just barely. Soundwave thought he saw his fingers flex and grip the floor.

"Of course... how forgetful of me. Unlike Decepticons, we Autobots aren't so good at the bowing and scraping business. Less practice. I'll try to remember in the future, master."

Soundwave did not care for the insult, but he did not respond to it. Instead he closed the distance between them in silence, taking careful note of the way Jazz stiffened, his ventilations going quite still. When Soundwave dropped his hand to the top of Jazz's head, he visibly flinched. Just as before, however, he did not pull away. Gently Soundwave glided his open hand along the surface of his helm, simply petting him and nothing more. Jazz's vents sputtered and hiccuped before picking up their standard pace again, just a little quicker and more shallow now.

This, Soundwave decided, was a more effective method of quieting Jazz than Skywarp's fists. More effective, and more enjoyable. He liked the feel of Jazz holding himself so still under his touch, though it would be better if he were not so tense. Neither of them moved for a while after that, until the balcony entrance to the loft flipped open and his twin aerial spies glided in. Immediately Soundwave stepped away from Jazz, raising his arm in traditional welcome. Buzzsaw always liked to alight upon his wrist, keeping some distance, while Laserbeak preferred to perch on his shoulder and nuzzle him in greeting. They performed this ritual first, then promptly fixed optics on the new arrival with undisguised curiosity. Buzzsaw stretched his wings and uttered a short, inquiring, yarp.

"Very well, thank you," Jazz said sweetly. "And yourself?"

*What?* Buzzsaw blinked and cocked his head.

"Autobot now my property," Soundwave informed them both. "Will be living here now. Pay no attention to his remarks."

Jazz looked wounded. The twins looked perplexed.

*New slave?* Laserbeak shuffled her claws restlessly on Soundwave's shoulder, communicating her distress through touch as well as thought. *When?*

*Why?* added Buzzsaw.

"Previous orn," he answered, ignoring the other question. "Unanticipated acquisition; apology, warning impossible."

*Trouble*, Buzzsaw predicted darkly, narrowing his optics at Jazz. Skulking in the corner, Ravage growled agreement. Laserbeak was more diplomatic about it, humming a series of quiet but concerned clicks.

"Arguments irrelevant," Soundwave informed them all, somewhat tersely. "Autobot here. Your efforts expected, minimal. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, prepare for data upload."

Jazz looked to be following the conversation, at least the half he could hear, with some fascination.

"I take it I'm not being welcomed with open... uh, claws. I can always just go, if it's going to be too much trouble."

"Autobot my property," Soundwave reminded him.

Jazz looked away rather than meet Soundwave's stare. "Sure. Master."

"Surveillance recordings must be examined and analyzed. Will be occupied for some time."

"You have to spy on other Decepticons, I know. Please, don't let me keep you."

"Autobot will remain in residence. Ravage will supervise." Ravage's head jerked up at that, and he hissed with displeasure. Soundwave ignored him. "Good behavior expected."

"Cross my spark," Jazz assured him, insincere smile flashing across his face. Soundwave reached down for one final pat on the head, and predictably Jazz froze underneath it. He backed away and turned toward his work room, processor gearing itself toward the tasks waiting there. There would be new clips from the twins to review and categorize, threats to scan for, the daily report to be drafted and sent along to Megatron. All this demanded his primary attention, but even so he could not help hearing Jazz as the work room door closed behind him.

"So... what's new, pussy cat?"

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*Aggrenet-1 online. Status: activating. Enter passcode.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Passcode accepted. Data upload y/n?*

**Y**

*Uplink data.*

*Data accepted.*

*Data compiling - 0%*

*Perform security upgrade now y/n?*

**Y**

*Enter new passcode.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Confirm new passcode.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*New passcode confirmed. Scanning firewalls.*

*Data compiling - 20%*

*Scanning firewalls - 15%*

**Archive retrieval, enter.**

*Archives opened. Run query.*

**Autobot, designation Jazz, history. Enter.**

*Searching...*

*Data compiling - 50%*

*Scanning firewalls - 65%*

*Search complete: Autobot, designation Jazz.*

*Origin: unknown.*

*[274v - 471v] First known location: Iacon. Pre-war era occupation, owner of local nightspot, designation Sparkbeat. Multiple citations of popularity within Iacon.*

*[301v, 364v, 402v] Three times arrested for suspicions of dealing in black market. Arresting officer, Autobot designation Prowl [deactivated]. All three occasions, charges dropped for lack of evidence.*

*[472v] Sparkbeat destroyed in Decepticon attack on Iacon. Location of Jazz, unknown.*

*[553v] Intruder captured in Decepticon camp; identity unconfirmed. Appearance matches Autobot Jazz. (Probability, 75%) Intruder escaped before interrogation could begin.*

*[554v - 682v] Jazz's whereabouts unknown. Presumed Autobot espionage (?)*

*[682v] Confirmed sighting, battle of Tyger Pax. Injured Blitzwing (nonfatal).*

*[705v] Confirmed sighting, battle of Vos.*

*[724v] Confirmed sighting, unnamed battle (second moon, planet #398-641)*

*[733v] Decepticon generators outside Vos lost to explosion. Suspected agent Jazz; unconfirmed. (Probability, 60%)*

*[796v] Decepticon communications network infected by foreign virus. Signed, "your friendly neighborhood saboteur". Widely suspected agent Jazz. (Probability 95%)*

*[?] Jazz promoted to head of Autobot Intelligence and Special Operations, exact date unknown*

*[844v] Confirmed member of Ark crew.*

*[844v] Confirmed sighting, Earth.*

*[844v] Captured by gestalt team Combaticon, along with Autobot sniper Cliffjumper [deactivated]. Escaped before interrogation could begin.*

*[845v] Attempted sabotage attempt on Decepticon headquarters, Cybertron. Minor explosions, no fatalities. Intruder escaped, suspected agent Jazz. (Probability 64%)*

*[845v] Espionage subordinate, Autobot designation Bumblebee, captured. Unsuccessful rescue attempt followed; intruder escaped. Suspected agent Jazz. (Probability 79%)*

*[845v] Confirmed sighting, battle on Cybertron. Reported injured by Combaticon, designation*

*Brawl, but successfully escaped with other Autobots.*

*[845v] Last remaining force of Autobots trapped on unnamed fifth moon, planet #645-982. Included Autobots designation Jazz, Prowl [deactivated], Ironhide [deactivated], Wheeljack [deactivated], and Cliffjumper [deactivated]. Explosion destroyed enemy force; Jazz lone survivor. Captured by Decepticon, designation Skywarp.*

*[845v] Held in Decepticon prison for six diuns. Released to Decepticon Lord Megatron, kept for sixteen orns. Formally given to Decepticon designation Skywarp in recognition of his initial capture.*

*Currently under ownership of Decepticon designation Skywarp.*

**Archival data modification, enter: "Currently under ownership of Decepticon, designation Soundwave."**

*Archival entry accepted.*

*Firewalls scanned - 100%.*

*Data compiled - 100%*

*Begin data analysis y/n?*

**Y.**

---

The universe, Soundwave knew, was full of secrets. They layered over one another, packed deep and invisible within worlds. Some mechs kept them; others couldn't. Sometimes it was the secret that kept the mech, and he was never the wiser. Soundwave's task had always been to find these secrets, patiently stalking and snatching them from obscurity. Most were inconsequential. Some he reported to his lord. A few he kept for himself. And though Soundwave was the very best hunter of secrets, he knew he was not perfect. The universe was complicated with them, and he was only one mech. Some secrets were beyond his reach.

For example, the secret to Jazz's smile. To Soundwave, its existence was illogical. Twice he'd built himself a new life, twice he'd watched it be destroyed and crumble to ash around him. He'd watched his fellow soldiers die in battle. He'd been taken prisoner, beaten, raped, and humiliated, and won as a prize over a card game in a nightspot probably much like the one he used to own. But he still lifted his chin, and smiled. Jazz was more than a secret, he was a walking mystery.

He was also deep in recharge, not halfway through the orn. Soundwave looked down at the bot curled up at the base of the couch and directed a general inquiry at Ravage. But his subordinate just tucked his nose between his paws, tail twitching haughtily, in no mood to be helpful. Probably he was just tired, after waking up from his recharge too early. Soundwave did not know why he'd chosen to shut down on the floor, rather than the more comfortable couch. He'd insisted on the floor the previous orn, too. Curious.

Soundwave was reluctant to wake him, but it had to be done. He knelt by Jazz's side and was

reaching to shake his shoulder lightly when Jazz's visor snapped back online. Reflexively he cringed, shrinking himself into a smaller ball than he already was, and froze. Hand still outstretched, Soundwave did the same.

"Recharge must end, medical appointment soon. Stand now."

"Just five more kliks, Skywarp."

"Designation, not Skywarp. Autobot knows this." Soundwave hauled Jazz to his feet, not missing how he swayed and nearly buckled. His visor flickered on and off a few times, calibrating. Systems had clearly been right in the middle of a cycle when he woke so abruptly, leaving Jazz disoriented.

"Query, can you walk? Autobot can be carried."

"Autobot will not be carried, Autobot can walk just fine on his own thank you." Jazz tugged his elbow out of Soundwave's grasp and tried to back away without falling over. He was mostly successful, only stumbling a little.

"Autobot may recharge on couch. Floor, unnecessary."

"Huh? Oh." Jazz looked at the couch as if he hadn't noticed it until this moment. "Skywarp didn't really want me on his furniture, you know, ever. I'm used to the floor now."

Soundwave did not reply to that, but tipped up Jazz's chin to take a closer look at his face. It did not concern him where Jazz chose to nap, but it did make him wonder. So far, this bot had fallen, so very far from what he used to be. The mystery was not where he slept, but how he could bring himself to wake up. Something inside Jazz was stronger than he looked.

Intriguing.

---

Hook met them in his medbay, one of the many subsections of the sprawling Constructicons' lair, with arms crossed and a look of flat disbelief on his face.

"Since when," he asked bluntly, "do you play card games?"

Soundwave did not answer, but Jazz snorted. "Methinks you have become an object of gossip, Soundwave."

"Everybody already knows," Hook confirmed. "Seekers ain't known for keeping their mouths shut. And you're not known for hanging out in nightspots, or hanging out anywhere, come to think of it. So, again, since when do you play card games?"

"Questions, irrelevant. Medical maintenance required now." He clasped a firm hand on Jazz's shoulder and pushed him forward. Jazz, who barely reached Hook's mid-torso, lifted his chin and met the massive Constructicon stare for stare.

"Do your worst," he said haughtily. "I'll never talk."

Hook cycled air from his vents and rolled his optics. "...right. This should be fun. Runt!"

The young Autobot medic scurried into the room. "Yes, master! What do you- oh, Jazz!" First Aid

almost tripped over himself when he caught sight of Jazz, his blue optics dilating with surprise. Jazz smiled at him, and not with the flippant grin he'd been flashing at Skywarp and Soundwave. This smile was small, but genuine.

"Hey, Aid. Good to see ya."

"But you..." First Aid looked at Soundwave, then quickly away when he made accidental optic contact. "What happened to -"

"Skywarp? Stupid glitch lost me in a card game, if you can believe it. Now I'm with Tall Dark and Sullen here."

Soundwave shot Jazz a warning look, which Jazz answered with a wicked grin.

Hook snapped his fingers impatiently. "Get your gears in motion, slave. Prep the 'bot for maintenance and run all the full scans. If he looks half as bad on the inside as he does on the out, this is going to take a while. Soundwave, you'll probably want to leave and come back. I'll comm you."

"Understood."

Hook opened his mouth like he wanted to say something else, but Soundwave was already turning to leave. First Aid, meanwhile, was leading Jazz to a medberth. *Literally* leading him. Was it really necessary to clutch at Jazz's hand like that? Soundwave did not like it, but to show jealousy was beneath him. There would be time enough to demonstrate to Jazz exactly whom he belonged to.

Wordlessly he left the medbay.

---

Hook was not a mech much inclined to kid. He had warned Soundwave that it would take some time, and it did. The active cycle was nearing its end, with Rumble and Frenzy due to return at any moment, when Hook finally hailed him. Soundwave promptly shut down his work console and returned to the Constructicon complex, where he found Hook in all shades of grouchy.

"Remind me to shoot Skywarp sometime," he started. "Fragging glitch. I know he's got a few short circuits up in the processor, but even he should have been able to see his slave was barely standing. Did he think Lord Megatron would have another little Autobot toy to give him, when this one died? Trust a Seeker to have no concept of *consequences*. Hydraulics were all of alignment, probably due to getting thrown against the wall on a regular basis. I'm surprised he could walk as straight as he did. Joints were locked, rotator cuffs clogged with dust and debris, and all manners of rust corrosion going on under the armor, because the air-head flyboy couldn't even be bothered to let his slave rinse off in the washracks. I won't even go into the umpteen thousand dents and scratches on top of the armor; obviously you already know about those. My Autobot got most of 'em out, and he's giving him a fresh paintjob as we speak. Wish the rest of it could be that easy.

"A fluid flush cleaned out his joints, but they're still liable to catch dust. His model's got a lot more gaps in the armor than most, so regular rinses are important. As for his fuel intake... Primus almighty, you'd think we were still starving for energon or something. The bot weighs maybe three-quarters what he should, for his size. He's been losing armor and more than a couple systems to starvation; I think self-repair was the first to go. Anyway, his intake has narrowed and his fuel tanks oversensitized, to wring every last nutrient out of what fuel he can get, so he can't even ingest a full



serving of energon in one sitting. Hope you haven't tried to force any on him. No? Good. I've already commed Mixmaster to crystallize energon into several dozen solid treats. Body heat will melt the shell after ingestion, releasing the energon slowly without flooding his systems. They're laced with several metallic supplements too, which should boost his health and undo some of the damage to his armor. Give him one every joor, and by the time you've finished off the box his systems should be back to normal. I hope. You can send one of your pack around to Mixmaster's shop to pick them up later.

"My other main concern is energy. The fragger went into recharge while I was working on him - maybe he wore himself out with his own one-liners. Has he been going into short, frequent recharges rather than a full cycle?"

Soundwave nodded.

"Figured as much. He hasn't been getting enough energy to sustain him for the active cycle, so he goes into recharge, but his body doesn't have the nutrition to do any repair or defragmentation, so he wakes up again. Once he's on a steady diet of those energon treats, hopefully that will level out.

There's nothing more I can do for him now; his body has to initiate self-repair to do the rest of the healing. That all clear enough to you?"

"Instructions, understood. Will be carried out as stated."

Hook's optics flickered over to the windowed wall dividing his medbay. On the other side Soundwave could see First Aid putting the finishing touches on Jazz's memorable color scheme.

"Listen... Soundwave. I know this is none of my business, but are you sure you really want to do this? I mean, yes, he's going to live, but -"

"Assertion, correct," Soundwave agreed coolly. "None of your business."

An unhappy shadow crossed Hook's face, but he shut his mouth and kept it that way. First Aid and Jazz returned to the main room, and Soundwave ran an approving scan over his new slave. The multiple dents and scratches were gone now, leaving his armor smooth and clean, the black and white crisply divided. Jazz lifted his chin, clearly self-conscious under Soundwave's scrutiny.

"Like what you see?"

"Results, acceptable. Come."

"Yes... master." He glanced over his shoulder at his fellow Autobot, and again reached for his hand to give it a final squeeze. They held on to each other a little longer than Soundwave would have liked, but Hook spoke up before he could reprimand Jazz.

"Alright, enough of the melting-spark cuddles. Get your aft in gear, you know what needs cleaning." He cuffed First Aid on the head with just enough vigor to make him stumble and let go of Jazz, though Soundwave knew Hook could have easily knocked him clear across the room.

Interesting; perhaps this was the reason Hook was fritzing his wires about Skywarp's treatment of Jazz.

It was none of his concern, anyway, just as his own affairs were none of Hook's concern. Jazz was standing beside him, watching him, ready to leave.

"Well? Are we going?"

"Slave will not question master." He tapped a finger up underneath Jazz's chin, in something like a

mild rebuke, and quickly Jazz jerked his head back. "But yes, going. Walk."

---

Silence stretched between them like an invisible chain. Soundwave was accustomed to, and indeed preferred, the quiet, but he suspected Jazz was not and did not. All the way home he'd tried, with one snappy insult after another, to test the boundaries to Soundwave's patience and never reached them. Soundwave said nothing, most likely the response Jazz wanted least. Now that they'd returned to his loft, and Jazz had run out of witty barbs, he hovered uneasily by Soundwave's couch and didn't take his gaze off Soundwave for an astrosec.

"Quiet," he murmured, unnecessarily so. "Where's your entourage?"

Soundwave did not bother to answer. The avian twins had already left for their nocturnal rounds. The older pair were finished with their shift, but had received his comm and detoured to fetch the waiting parcel from Mixmaster's shop. Ravage was out somewhere, skulking in Cybertron's alleyways, keeping to his own unpredictable schedule. For now, at least a little while, they were alone in his home.

Jazz flinched and backed up half a step when Soundwave moved closer, vents hissing nervously. Dim lighting reflected off his newly painted armor, bathing him in a light sheen, an invitation to touch. Soundwave held back from the temptation, instead taking his time to circle Jazz and inspect him thoroughly. Just as he had for Ravage that morning, Jazz turned to keep pace with him, never letting Soundwave completely out of his sight.

"Command: stand still."

Jazz did nothing of the sort. "Force of habit, Soundwave. When I get jumped by a Decepticon, I at least like to see it coming."

"'Jumping' unnecessary," Soundwave informed him. He closed the last of the distance between them and Jazz backed right up to the couch, hands squeezing the top edge when he realized he had nowhere else to go. His vents stilled at the light touch of Soundwave's finger.

The smooth, satiny texture of the armor was such an improvement over the previous orn. Soundwave took his time in enjoying it, gliding his fingertips across Jazz's chest, and then flipping over his hand to run the back of it across that inviting metal. Jazz flinched again when Soundwave lifted his arm by the wrist and ran a finger along its length, memorizing the feel of his new property. His model did indeed have many gaps in the armor, wires peeking enticingly from within as Soundwave lifted then lowered his arm. Back up to the shoulder his hand swept, over the rotator cuff, and up to the vulnerable seam at his neck. Jazz tensed and shrunk into himself when Soundwave stroked one of the visible wires, armor clamping reflexively shut in revulsion.

"Command: cease negative reaction."

He'd offlined his visor the moment Soundwave touched him, but now it flickered on again. "Did you just- are you..." Astonished disbelief curled into his words. "Are you *ordering* me to *like* it?"

He stared at the silent Soundwave, some of his tension unwinding when he shook his head and forced a chuckle. "Oh, Soundwave. You can make me do many things, but you cannot make me like them. You cannot make me want *you*."

He pushed the heel of his hand against Soundwave's chest and tried to walk away; promptly Soundwave snatched his arm and pulled him back up against the couch. Jazz's engines surged with

adrenaline and he struggled, but he didn't even clear Soundwave's chest and he was already trapped. One hand effortlessly pinned his wrist to the couch and held it there; Soundwave took his chin in his other hand and tilted it up and aside, exposing his throat.

"Challenge accepted," Soundwave said coolly, almost nuzzling the wires in his neck. Jazz twitched at the proximity, and smothered a whimper somewhere in his vocalizer. "Autobot will submit. You have no choice."

"What are you going to do, hold me down until I change my mind?"

"Soundwave, patient. Jazz, prisoner and slave. Outcome inevitable."

"So you think. Let me go."

"Request denied." Soundwave adjusted his grip on Jazz's face, forcing him to look up at the ceiling. Gradually he loosened his hold, sliding his hand down over his throat, very much aware of the life flowing through these exposed cables and wires. Electricity prickled at his fingers, sizzling pleasantly. Jazz had shuttered his visor again, and stifled another whimper. All he had to do was crush his fist around them, and he could do serious damage; pressure applied long and hard enough would cut off all power flow to his processor and perhaps even take him offline. But all Soundwave did was squeeze gently, generating another wave of thrilling tingles.

"Mine," Soundwave declared, knowing he had Jazz's full attention now. "Jazz, mine."

"If you say it," whispered his trembling slave, "does it make it true?"

"Witness evidence." Soundwave exerted more pressure on a delicate sensor relay wire, and Jazz shuddered. His internal fans kicked on again.

"Stop."

Soundwave ignored him, still rubbing lightly along his sensor wires, intent on goading another wave of pleasure within Jazz's body. His vents had opened wider, cycling air furiously into his systems.

"Stop. *Stop.*"

Unexpectedly he struck Soundwave's hand away with his own free hand, engines rumbling with muted panic. Penned in like this, he didn't have a hope of pushing off Soundwave's massive frame, but he pressed one hand flat against Soundwave's chest anyway.

"Enough with the wireplay. Just bend me over the couch and do it already. We both know that's what you want."

Patently Soundwave peeled Jazz's hand free, holding it gently but firmly within his own.

"I want surrender," he corrected. The armor of a mech's palm and fingertips was among the most sensitive of the entire body, so much more susceptible to touch. He caressed his hand, rubbing his thumb lightly across Jazz's palm, calmly re-establishing his grip every time Jazz tried to pull away. And all the while Jazz's fans were still spinning, unsuccessfully struggling against the body heat that Soundwave could already feel. His resistance puzzled Soundwave. Surely Skywarp never bothered to induce any pleasure for Jazz. Was this not an improvement over his usual beatings?

"Fighting, meaningless, ineffective. Query, why persist?"

"You wouldn't understand," Jazz wheezed.

"Touch, pleasing."

"Not to me it isn't. Let me go. Let me *go*."

He twisted his wrist and slipped free of Soundwave's grasp, bracing himself against the couch to shove all his weight against Soundwave. He didn't shift his target, but he did shift the couch and that did just as well for his purposes. Soundwave had almost forgotten how agile and quick Jazz was; he darted to the side and put several steps between them in the space of a sparkbeat. Now he stood between Soundwave and the front door, looking poised to flee like a wild Earth animal.

Soundwave remained very still. "Will you run?"

Jazz hesitated, but shook his head. "Nowhere for me to go, is there?"

"Then you stay. Autobot will submit. You have no choice."

Soundwave extended an open hand, beckoning Jazz to return. Jazz didn't move, though, looking from his hand back up to his face with wretched misery stealing across his expression. His engines quieted, vents dropping to a lower cycle, but still he did not move. Once again, the silence stretched between them.

---

Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on pavlov

"Uh... are we interrupting anything?"

In their usual modus operandi, the twins managed to completely ruin the moment. Side by side in the doorway, Rumble and Frenzy stared at the scene inside with optic ridges arched as high as they could go. Jazz edged away from the door, still not taking his gaze off Soundwave.

"Yes. Thank Primus."

In unison the twins looked from Jazz back to Soundwave, gleefully curious, but Soundwave simply returned their gaze calmly and ignored Jazz. "Errand, successful?"

"Yeah, we got it. It was heavy, too. What's in here, nickel bon-bons?" With some effort, the pair kicked Mixmaster's box, which was almost as big as either of them, forward. Soundwave did not answer their question.

"Rumble, Frenzy, prepare for data upload. Analysis delayed, prompt beginning necessary."

"What, now?" Frenzy tilted his head in Jazz's direction. "Weren't you about to, uh, 'do' something?"

"Autobot, not going anywhere." Jazz grimaced at the words, and let his head fall back with a thunk against the wall behind him. "Autobot will wait. Rumble, Frenzy, prepare for data upload now."

This time the twins mumbled assent, and after throwing a smirk or two in Jazz's direction shuffled to Soundwave's monitor room. Soundwave watched Jazz slide slowly back down to the floor, vents still busy expelling all the pent-up heat within.

"Data analysis must begin. Autobot has no supervision; chains necessary? Escape, impossible."

"I think we've established that," Jazz murmured, visor shuttered again.

"Good behavior expected."

"Just leave me alone."

Soundwave nearly twitched at that. "Activities... not finished this cycle. Prepare to surrender."

He didn't give Jazz any time to snap a comeback, and retreated into his work room.

---

To their credit, Rumble and Frenzy did actually manage to hold out until they'd finished uploading all their new surveillance. Instead of dashing off to play video games the moment Soundwave dismissed them, the both of them hung over the top of his work console like their feline brother, and stared.

"Sooo..." started Rumble. Soundwave ignored him.

"When are ya going to ta~lk?" Frenzy added, voice pitched just short of that annoying wheedling tone they'd perfected.

"Discussion, unnecessary." With casual expertise he began sorting and streaming what they'd uploaded.

"Come on, Soundwave, we've been real patient!"

"Yeah, for us!"

"Don't you think you owe us a little explanation?"

"We sent you out to get a drink and, Primus forbid, *talk* to other mechs. We didn't expect you to come home with a new slave."

"Not that it won't be fun having Jazz around to tease - which we won't," Frenzy quickly amended, after Soundwave shot him a Look. "Much. It's just... well- again? Are you sure?"

"Name occurrences in past when I have been unsure."

Rumble and Frenzy exchanged glances and shrugs.

"We don't want you to get hurt, that's all. You hurt, we hurt. Ya know?"

"Aware of symbiotic connection."

Simultaneously they huffed. "No need to get sarcastic. We're trying to look out for you!"

"Protection appreciated, unnecessary. Dismissed."

"Slaggit, Soundwave -"

"Dismissed," he repeated, sharpening the edge of his tone just enough. This time they took the hint, but they didn't go quietly.

"Fine, we're gone."

"But don't expect us to pitch in for any berthside nursing this time around."

"He's yours."

"Not *ours*."

"Don't forget that."

"Cuz we won't."

"We're outta here."

"Have fun with the new toy. Hope he's worth it."

Somehow, they managed to make the door whooshing shut behind them sound petulant.

---

It took Soundwave most of the next joor to catalog all surveillance brought in by the twins, and it would have taken two more to properly analyze it. But that could wait until the next cycle. He locked down the console instead and returned to the front room, not at all sure what he would find there and preparing himself for the worst.

The twins, however, were gone. The loft was silent, and empty save for Jazz. Soundwave was not very clear on what he was doing; he looked tired, but instead of going into recharge on the floor again he was pacing lightly from one end of the room to the other. He didn't look up at the sound of the door opening, but Soundwave thought he detected a tiny hiccup in Jazz's ventilations.

"Finished already? Lucky me."

"Absence of Rumble and Frenzy, unexpected. Describe interaction."

"Are you asking if they were mean to me?" He flashed a quick grin, but never stopped moving. "Or me to them? Words are just words, Soundwave, nothing to worry about. Besides, they didn't have many of them to say. Just gave me some nasty looks that made me glad there's no such thing as rotten tomatoes on Cybertron, and left. Tell me, why is every one of your brats glaring at me like I'm going to stick a vibroblade in their back?"

Perceptive and curious, Jazz paused mid-step and looked right at him. Soundwave ignored the question with some effort.

"Pacing, odd activity. State reasons."

"I'm trying to stay awake. Are you hiding something?"

Soundwave extended his hand towards Jazz. "Come here."

"No." Restlessly Jazz tapped one pede into the floor. "You want it, you come and get it yourself. I'm not in the mood to give you anything."

If he was expecting verbal argument, he would be disappointed. Never one to waste words when action was required, Soundwave crossed the room in 2.3 nanokliks. Sleepy Jazz hardly had the chance to flinch before Soundwave had him pressed against the wall, wrists pinned under his grip.

"Jazz, mine," he reminded his slave, every word laced with dark promise. "Autobot will come when I order. Will give when I want. Will use address 'master'. Jazz... *mine*."

"Sadistic, coldsparked bastard," Jazz whispered, not missing a beat. "Is this why you had Hook spend all the orn fixing me? So you could beat me into the wall and break me all over again? Go ahead. You don't hit harder than Skywarp. I'm not afraid of you."

By way of reply, Soundwave slid Jazz's hands up and over his head, crossing his wrists and holding them fast with just one hand. The other he stroked along Jazz's jawline, provoking another flinch.

"Liar," he said flatly. "Jazz, afraid."

"Don't confuse fear with disgust."

Brave words, though he'd begun to tremble again. Soundwave eased more of his weight against the trapped Jazz, conscious of the accelerated rush of fluids through his systems, and the unnaturally rapid electropulse in his wires. Jazz's body was fast draining energy that he did not have to spare.

This hyperpanicked response to Soundwave's nearness could not go on.

He released his grip on Jazz and stepped back. Jazz dropped his arms and rubbed his wrists, but kept his back to the wall and a wary gaze trained on Soundwave.

"What, am I boring you?" he asked, when Soundwave walked away. "Are we done?"

"Negative." He collected Mixmaster's box and opened it, to find it packed with rows of crystallized energon. He took just one and shut it again, idly rolling the treat around in his open palm as he returned to Jazz. The fuel inside sparkled, flashing through the translucent shell like dancing light. "Refueling required."

Jazz hadn't moved, still keeping close to the wall. Uncertainly he looked from the energon to Soundwave. "That? For me?"

"Affirmative. Suitable fuel for your current condition."

"Oh. Fine." Jazz extended a hand for it, but Soundwave closed his fist shut around it just before he could reach. Unease prickled all over Jazz like invisible needles. "What do you want? For me to beg? To ask for it oh-please-master?"

"Negative. Open mouth."

"What?" Jazz cocked his head quizzically, but when Soundwave held up the treat between finger and thumb his dermal plating flattened in disbelieving comprehension. "Oh, you are kidding me."

"Open mouth," Soundwave repeated.

"I'll just go hungry, thanks." He tried to slip to the side, but Soundwave braced an arm against the wall, neatly blocking his exit. His engines revved in a rebellious huff. "I might fight you on this."

"Autobot will lose. Weak, undernourished. Fuel is being offered; take it."

"You don't want to do this, Soundwave. You don't want to waste time feeding me, you've got so many important things to do, it's better to let me feed myself."

"Assertion, incorrect. Open mouth."

Jazz flattened himself against the wall as far as he could get from the hovering Soundwave, and glared at the offered treat with undisguised contempt.

"Is this how you train all your pets?"

"Prepared to wait," Soundwave replied calmly. "Autobot will eat."

Jazz fidgeted in his distress, glancing longingly to his right and left, but they both knew Soundwave had no intention of letting him escape. He shifted his weight back and forth, fans alternately whirring and then stilling as his body tried to obey his instinct to bolt, while Soundwave waited patiently. It took some time, but at last Jazz gave in to the only inevitable conclusion. His shoulders slumped in resignation, and he opened his mouth.

Soundwave never rushed. With gentle care he popped the treat between Jazz's lips and deposited it on his glossa, allowing his fingertip to glide over its surface as he withdrew. Jazz shuddered, visor firmly off. Soundwave watched to make sure he swallowed the fuel, but continued to rub his thumb lightly over Jazz's lower lip. Silence reigned for several long moments.



"Do you think," Jazz whispered at last, "that is all it will take?"

"Negative," Soundwave assured him. "Prepared to do much more."

---

Perhaps in time, Jazz would come to understand what that really meant. As for now, he still seemed determined to fight Soundwave on the oddest of small details. In replay of the previous night cycle, he backed into the corner of Soundwave's personal chamber with all his hackles raised.

"Just let me recharge on the floor."

"Denied."

"Why does it matter so much to you?"

"Query, redirected: why does it matter so much to you?"

"I told you, I'm used to it. I'm the slave, remember? My place is on the floor."

"Your place, where I say," Soundwave corrected, resting one hand on the berth in question.

"Come."

"No. You kick in your sleep."

"Jazz, lying."

"Fine, I kick in my sleep. You don't want that pretty plating dented, do you?"

"Consequences, tolerable. Come, or I will fetch."

"Did last night, didn't ya? Maybe I'll always make you come and get me."

"Negative," Soundwave informed his slave with no uncertainty. "Jazz will learn to obey."

"Or what?"

It was a challenge, and Soundwave answered it with swift, decisive action. In two strides he'd crossed the room, snatched Jazz's wrist, and tossed him onto the berth. Jazz landed with a grunt and tried to scramble off, only to be pinned there by Soundwave's weight.

"Or this," Soundwave said simply, and proceeded to settle in. Jazz was smaller than he was, but his armor curved and dipped in just the right places to make it comfortable for lying on top of him. Promptly Jazz tried to thrash, but Soundwave had effortlessly trapped him under his heavier body, and one firm hand clasped Jazz's wrists together over his head.

"What are you doing?" Jazz asked anxiously. "Get off!"

"Jazz, demonstrating refusal to comply. Soundwave, demonstrating consequences. If you will not remain in berth, I will keep you here."

Several of Jazz's vents were now blocked, and those on his sides opened wider to compensate for air

circulation. "I'll overheat. Stop."

Soundwave lowered his face very close to Jazz's, taking the opportunity to study him closely. Jazz promptly turned his head to the side, but Soundwave could still read his distress.

"You dislike close confinement."

"Who does? Get off!" Air was frantically flowing through his vents, but Soundwave could already feel the rising temperature under his armor. *"Please."*

"Answer earlier query. Why resist? Berth more comfortable. More dignified."

"You think I even remember what dignity is?" He was reduced to taking in extra air through his mouth now, and gulped for air. "Get - off - me."

"Answer," Soundwave demanded, "question."

"I don't want to sleep with the enemy! Don't make me sleep with the enemy, Soundwave, don't make me sleep with *you*. I would sooner sleep with razor drones."

Surprised, and strangely irritated by the venom in Jazz's tone, Soundwave grasped Jazz by the chin and turned his face up again. "Enemy, inappropriate term. War over, Decepticons victorious. Term is master, not 'enemy'."

"You just keep telling yourself that." Jazz shuttered his visor rather than look at Soundwave this close, shifting all his concentration to drawing in enough air to keep his systems cool.

"Repeat it."

Jazz was silent.

"Repeat it, or I will not move." He dug his knees into Jazz's legs a little harder, pressing his weight against Jazz's chest still further. Jazz gasped, tilting his head back for better air flow. Still he said nothing, but Soundwave was patient. 3.7 breems passed before Jazz gave in.

"Master," he panted. "Not enemy."

"Jazz will recharge in berth."

"Yes."

"Response, favorable. Reward granted." As promised, Soundwave rolled off of Jazz and propped himself on his side next to him. Instantly all Jazz's vents flipped open, gratefully drawing in the cool air that he so desperately needed. Soundwave said nothing, idly tracing a finger along the old red sigil on his chest while Jazz regained his temperature equilibrium.

"Jazz, permitted to recharge now."

He said nothing, lying quite still, and gradually his ventilations became longer and deeper. Soundwave thought he had already slipped into recharge when, unexpectedly, he spoke.

"Soundwave two, Jazz zero," he murmured, soft as ash in the wind. "You're better at this than Skywarp."

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Untitled, by Merrypaws



## on observations

Jazz had warmth. The observation crossed Soundwave's processor as he online'd, before he'd even powered up his visor. The steady hum of his systems generated a pleasant warmth against his own body that none of his tiny symbiotes could match, Jazz being much bigger than they were.

Soundwave liked it. He was pleased that Jazz had obeyed his order to remain in the berth, even if, as he discovered when the visor calibrated, he'd scooted to the edge and as far as he could get from Soundwave. He'd fallen into recharge with one arm draped across his slave, but Jazz had somehow managed to wriggle out from underneath without waking him. Interesting talent.

Jazz was already online. Soundwave had guessed he would be, still on his odd recharging schedule, and confirmed it when he reached to pull him closer. Jazz flinched away from his grasp and tried to roll off the side, only for Soundwave to snatch him at the last moment and drag him back on. He growled in pain and irritation.

"Let me go."

"Jazz, not permitted to move."

"Technically..." He smothered a whine when Soundwave nestled him against his own body and wrapped an arm around his chest, holding him securely in place. "Technically you said to stay in the berth while you're in recharge, but now you're online, so I want to ge-ahhh." He interrupted himself with a quiet gasp, when Soundwave nudged a fingertip into the mid-torso gap in his armor. Jazz clawed at his arm, scrabbling for freedom, but Soundwave just tilted his weight further forward, threatening to roll over and trap Jazz beneath him. Not wanting a repeat of vent suffocation, Jazz took the hint and promptly subsided. Pressed together so close, Soundwave could feel him shudder.

The previous cycle, when they were standing, it would have been awkward for Soundwave to reach Jazz's hip joint. Now, lying together like this, he took the opportunity and slid his hand downward, tracing a finger along that most sensitive of joints. Jazz froze, his armor shut tight against intrusions.

"Relax," Soundwave ordered.

"No." Jazz was clutching at Soundwave's arm with a grip that bordered on painful. "Can't make me."

"You will learn what I can and cannot do." He lightened his touch to barely more than a tickle, ghosting along the thin seam, and was rewarded by a jolt in Jazz's pulse. That warmth was getting hotter. Unconsciously Jazz pushed himself back from the unwelcome touch, which resulted in rubbing up against Soundwave in a way that was really delightful. The friction made Soundwave aware of his own body heat, rising along with Jazz's, and the accelerating beat of his spark. Jazz had begun to pant by the time his armor finally loosened enough for Soundwave to slide his fingertips within. He found a sensor wire, just one, and tweaked it gently.

Jazz jerked in his grasp, almost smashing his head into Soundwave's face when he did so. Satisfied, Soundwave released his hold on Jazz.

"Now permitted to move."

"Thank Primus." Eagerly Jazz scrambled to get off the berth, but Soundwave wasn't finished.

"After refueling."

Half-off the edge, Jazz froze again. "I'm not hungry yet."

"Irrelevant. Hook's orders, must refuel every joor."

Soundwave sat up, and withdrew another treat from the subspaced box. "Turn around."

"Just give it to me, would you?"

"Order is to turn around."

Soundwave sensed that Jazz was making a face at the wall, but eventually he did force himself to twist partly back around. He opened his mouth without being told, this time, but Soundwave did not move to feed him. Instead he held the energon just shy of Jazz's mouth.

"Take it. No hands."

Humiliation and resentment were rolling off Jazz in waves, but he tipped forward and plucked it from Soundwave's hand with his mouth. Good, for he must learn to seek out Soundwave's touch and not fear it. This was a promising step.

And if he just so happened to nip Soundwave's fingertips, rather painfully, well... nobody said it would be a quick process.

---

"... third time this megacycle, and that's just the times I've *caught* them! Primus knows how many other times you've sent them pecking through my personal estate. I am Cybertron's Air Force Commander, general of all Decepticon seekers, my rank sets me above your meddling snoopers."

Starscream's wings had begun to quiver in his temper tantrum. In contrast, Soundwave stared at the screen impassively with fingers laced.

"Directive, monitor all activity on Cybertron."

"All except for that of Megatron himself," Starscream sneered. "Our glorious leader is no doubt exempt. As are, come to think of it, you. A convenient arrangement. But his second-in-command doesn't get the same privilege?"

"Will continue present surveillance unless ordered otherwise. Suggestion, discuss with Lord Megatron."

"I intend to. In the meantime, *I* suggest you keep a tighter leash on your pets. The next time I catch one of your canaries in my airspace, I'll punch it full of holes."

Soundwave stiffened, imperceptibly, but before he could say anything Starscream shot him a final smirk and terminated the connection. The screen went black, the console room silent. Soundwave cycled hot air from his vents, trying to soothe away his irritation, and not doing a very good job of it. Starscream had always been arrogant, quick to offend, and noisy about his dislike of Soundwave and his team. He had not, however, ever threatened to shoot one of them before.

Abruptly Soundwave stood and left the room. He found Jazz curled up in the corner of the main living room, on the floor of course, napping. Five cycles, since he'd acquired his new slave, and the self-repair Hook had promised was slowly coming back online. Jazz now slept longer but less frequently, down to just two naps during the active cycle from what had been at least six or seven.

Soundwave rarely disturbed his recharge, but by his calculations Jazz would be awake soon anyway. Without any preliminaries he snatched Jazz by the arm and hauled him to his feet.

"Whaa... whasgoingon?" Jazz stumbled and almost fell into Soundwave, righting himself just in time, and flexed his struts in a sleepy stretch. "What are you do- oh no. No no nononono!"

So said because Soundwave had opened the door to his private washracks, for the first time since Jazz's arrival. He dug his heels into the floor, but Soundwave had momentum, strength, and frustration on his side. With a single peremptory tug he yanked Jazz inside and let the door shut, pressing buttons for the solvent flow at the same time. A mild mixture gushed out of the wall fixtures, raining down on the still-waking Jazz. He spluttered, gasping a little as his intakes hastily shut themselves tight against fluid congestion.

"Did I miss something?"

"Hook's orders. Frequent washing necessary, dust contamination threat to health."

"What dust? You haven't let me outside - I'd have *noticed*."

"Turn."

Jazz glared and pushed aside Soundwave in a break for the door. He was getting stronger and faster, evidence of the repairs working away inside his body, but Soundwave was still stronger. He closed a hard grip around Jazz's arm and steered him into the wall, not very hard, just firmly enough to discourage struggle. Jazz growled and tried to break away again when Soundwave released his grip; Soundwave's response was to take both his hands and smack them flat against the wall. Jazz flinched at the unexpected violence, and this time remained where he'd been put.

"We are in a mood, aren't we? Bad day at the office, baby?"

"Command: silence."

Jazz lifted his chin, sharply, and belatedly Soundwave realized his mistake. Triumph gleamed in the corner of Jazz's visor that he could see. "First time you've had to tell me to be quiet; I think I nailed it. Jazz one."

"Soundwave three," he reminded his slave, pressing the foam brush against Jazz's back. His shoulders slumped a little when he realized it was true, and vents facing away from the water flow exhaled.

"Don't suppose there's any chance you'll just let me wash myself."

"None."

Foam bubbled up from within the bristles, and Soundwave moved it across Jazz's armor in broad, gentle circles. Jazz cringed a little, trying to shrink away, but Soundwave just compensated by moving in closer. With only so much space between himself and the wall, Jazz had no choice but to stay where he was. Soundwave had learned early, in his study of Jazz, that his slave absolutely detested being trapped in a close space. Just threatening to press him into the wall was usually enough to subdue him - probably something Skywarp never bothered to discover.

Up and over the shoulders he went, slathering Jazz's arm in white foam. He had observed other things, interesting details about his one-time-counterpart that he'd never known before. For all the noise and flair he'd so often brought to the battlefield, Jazz was a surprisingly quiet mech. *Literally* quiet; when the unhealthy rattles disappeared after Hook's visit, Soundwave noticed that Jazz could

move so silently across the room that even his advanced audios didn't pick up the noise.

Cybertronians were a generally noisy race, Decepticons in particular, moving about with the hiss and whirr of systems, pistons pumping, metal feet clanging against the ground. But Jazz moved as silently as Ravage, an impressive feat.

Around Jazz's torso he moved the brush, reaching around from behind to soap up his chest. Jazz hissed in endurance, fingers flexing against the wall. Five cycles of joorly handfeeding were behind them, but he still tended to flinch away from Soundwave's touch. He didn't always bite his fingers, but he did still glare. Soundwave knew it. Most mechs were properly confused by Jazz's visor, taking for granted that it hid so much of his expression, but Soundwave was a careful observer. He saw how the light glinted and flickered within, sometimes narrowing in concentration or occasionally brightening with a sudden flare of emotion. He did not completely understand all the signals, not yet, but in time he would.

Soundwave knelt, and the brush moved down with him. Jazz shuddered when he swept it over his aft, then down his legs. Perhaps most interesting of all, about that visor, was that Soundwave so often found it trained on him. Other Autobot slaves were afraid to make optic contact, shivering and hastily dropping their gaze if he happened to catch so much as a stray glance, and most Decepticons were not much braver. Probably they feared his rank and reputation. Jazz did not. Oh, he was wary, and cautious, always hovering silently in the corner of the room until Soundwave summoned him directly. But at any time, no matter what else was going on in the room, Soundwave only had to look up and he would see Jazz's gaze on him, ever watchful. He wasn't one to drop his stare when caught. Sometimes he would let a slow smile flicker across his face. If anything, it felt as though Jazz was studying Soundwave every bit as carefully as Soundwave was studying him.

Interesting details, all of them, but largely irrelevant. Soundwave stood again, holding Jazz close against his chest, ignoring his squirms to get free. What was relevant was the warmth Soundwave could feel through his armor, the healthy pulse thrumming in his wires, his shallow air circulations as he tried to ventilate. Already Soundwave's irritation had begun to dissolve, like this soap under hot running water. Jazz was a pleasing distraction.

"I'm drowning," Jazz whispered, just over the perpetual hiss of water. "Enough."

The nozzle that was positioned to spray Soundwave directly in the chest was hitting Jazz full in the face; yes, that's what he meant. Reluctantly Soundwave relaxed his arms and stepped back, allowing Jazz the freedom of movement to turn away from the water. He had to spit a few pints of it out of his mouth, and wipe away streaming rivulets over his visor. Wordlessly, Soundwave held out the brush.

Jazz spared it little more than a glance before looking up at Soundwave, back to that careful studying again. The water dripping over his visor obscured what little Soundwave might have been able to interpret.

Surprisingly enough, without any fuss or complaint at all, Jazz took the brush. "Well, you've already won this round. No sense in dragging it out."

"Wisely stated."

Perhaps, though, more easily stated than done. Jazz hesitated, there under the water flow, as if he wasn't quite sure how to make himself do this. Soundwave watched, and waited patiently. Jazz seemed absolutely transfixed by his chest, and raised one hand to it, touching the glass with the lightest of fingertip pressure. It was, Soundwave noted, the first occasion that Jazz had touched him in a nonaggressive manner. Tiny thrills ran through Soundwave's circuits because of it, sparking warmth and excitement.

Jazz, though, looked repulsed. Multiple shudders ran through his struts, and he swallowed hard like he was resisting fuel rejection. He was, Soundwave eventually realized, staring at the Decepticon sigil across his chest, lightly tracing his fingers over the purple emblem with a kind of horrified fascination. Just when Soundwave was sure Jazz would panic and push himself away, he squared his shoulders and slapped the brush smack in the middle of his chest. Thick foam splattered across the glass, obscuring the sigil, and once it was covered Jazz's stress appeared to ease off. Ventilations evening out, he set himself to soaping down Soundwave in broad, circular strokes.

"What upset you today... master? It's rare to see you vexed. Or, actually, showing any emotion at all. I didn't think you could."

"Decepticon politics, not your concern."

"Oh I think they are, if they're going to get me yanked out of a nice recharge and dumped on the floor of a washrack without warning. I didn't know Starscream could rattle you like that."

Soundwave looked sharply at Jazz, who smiled lazily before circling around behind Soundwave.

"Please, don't insult me. It's always Starscream. He torqued off Skywarp all the time, and I got to enjoy the aftermath. What'd he say to you?"

"Starscream's threats, insubstantial. Insignificant."

"If you say so." Jazz exerted pressure directly between his two main back struts, releasing a fresh surge of relaxation. "I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

"Assertion, correct." Soundwave shuttered his visor, allowing himself the luxury of enjoying this sensation. Jazz was very good at this task, sweeping and stroking across his armor and applying pressure in all the right places. Even the crest of his shoulders, which he could only just barely reach. Jazz would, he decided, always bathe him in the future.

Up and down his body Jazz went, all the way around, giving Soundwave no chance to reprimand him for missing a single spot. He did not hurry, but to Soundwave it still seemed too soon when he stepped back. Solvent splashed against his armor, rinsing him clean.

"So what now, master? The usual drill? Up against the wall, hands over my head, pretend to like it?" Jazz backed up into the described position, dropping his voice to a husky murmur. "Oh Soundwave, take me. You're the best I've ever had."

Soundwave cycled a little air from his vents. "Sarcasm, unnecessary."

"On the contrary, it's what gets me through the orn. So should I be bracing myself?"

In reply, Soundwave switched the water off and the dryer on. Hot air blasted out of the wall vents and made any kind of dialogue impossible for the next klik. Once it had run its course, Soundwave indicated the door.

"Out."

"Decepticons first."

---



As a diversion, Jazz was proving his worth multiple times over. He not only made for a pleasant trip to the washracks that day, but proceeded to balk at the polishing session Soundwave decided he wanted afterwards. Soundwave eventually had to wrestle him into submission, a task he rather enjoyed. It wasn't that he was lowering himself to some Skywarp-level, sizzling his circuits over his slave fighting back, just that Jazz's liveliness pleased him. His energy had made a soaring comeback, this orn. He scrabbled and fought, but once Soundwave had him pinned it was over and they both knew it. Jazz flinched and curled away from the polishing cloth like it burned, but afterwards his armor gleamed like new again. He looked temptingly handsome once Soundwave had finished, and he had to grudgingly add another point to Soundwave's score. A pleasant time indeed, though perhaps Jazz would not have agreed.

As it turned out, though, Jazz's returning health came with its own problem. Jazz was quite matter-of-fact about it, two cycles after the polishing incident.

"You have a problem," he said simply, standing directly in front of the door to Soundwave's console room. Soundwave didn't exactly jump, but his systems did give a tiny hiccup of surprise. He was standing so close that Soundwave would have walked directly into him when the door slid aside.

"Explain."

"I'm bored. I feel better now, not so sleepy all the time, my processor feels awake again - and it's *bored*. You cannot just leave me in this room all day while you play Big Brother, with nothing to do but sit on the floor and stare at the wall. When I get bored, I get restless, and you don't want that. Skywarp didn't. Prowl didn't. I have to have something to do."

Soundwave brushed Jazz aside with little effort, and continued into the front room. "Slave will ask, not demand."

"Fine. Pleeease, master, give me something to do. I need it, you have no idea how much I need it."

Soundwave thought he did. Jazz was all but hopping from one foot to another, visibly anxious and distressed, symptoms that alarmed Soundwave. His petition, he decided, was reasonable.

"State preferences."

"I like puzzles. If you have a puzzle datapad that would be good, give me something to work on in the daytime."

"Will be arranged."

Jazz exhaled, looking relieved. "Thank you."

Soundwave caught Jazz's chin in a firm grip, tipping up his face. "Thank you, master," he prompted.

"Thank you, *master*," Jazz repeated, the final word just a little sour. He tried to back away but Soundwave did not relinquish his hold. Casually, demonstrating how little he needed to hurry, Soundwave stroked a wire in Jazz's exposed throat. Jazz stiffened and shuttered his visor, fists clenching.

"And at the end of the cycle," he continued, voice just a little strained, "what about then?"

Soundwave rubbed his thumb lightly against a sensor relay, and watched Jazz try to contain the shudder. "Query, not understood."

"Well, it's not that I don't love your sadistic petting sessions -" He winced when Soundwave pinched a wire in punishment. "- but I think we can do better. Something more intellectual."

Soundwave's hand stopped moving; he was intrigued. "Such as?"

"You play any games? Well, I know you play *trabacc*. What about something even trickier? Say, *hax*?"

Jazz now had Soundwave's full interest. *Hax* was among the most difficult games on Cybertron, and few Decepticons had the intelligence or desire to play it. The humans on Earth had something like it, though with fewer pieces and played on a flat two-dimensional board, and while stationed there Soundwave occasionally hacked into tournament sites and shredded their top champions for fun. But that simplistic chess game couldn't compare to the real thing.

"*Hax*, acceptable activity." He released Jazz, who backed away with a muttered "*Jazz, two*" under the hum of his systems. Soundwave pretended not to hear it. They both knew well enough that Soundwave could have as much of Jazz as he liked, later in the berth.

"Will arrange gameset."

Something like a grin tugged at Jazz's mouth. "Then I think that's my cue to say... bring it on, Decepticon."

---

"What - the - frag?" were the words out of Frenzy's mouth a joor later, when he and Rumble had returned to the loft and took a good look at the far corner of the room. A small table there was now taken up with the elaborate *hax* set, Soundwave and Jazz seated at each end, both deeply absorbed in the game. Jazz's gaze flickered over to the twins for just a nanoklik before resettling on the game.

"Evening, strangers."

"Don't talk to me, *slave*. And Soundwave, seriously, what the frag? You're making him play *hax* with you? If you wanted to torture him, we could have given you much better ideas than that."

"Willingness to assist noted, not necessary."

Rumble and Frenzy rolled their optics in identical disgust. Neither of them had taken very well to Soundwave's attempted instruction in the rules of *hax*, and by the end of the so-called lessons, the prevailing consensus was that the twins were better off sticking to video games.

"Well are you almost done? We have data to upload so we can *go*."

"Negative." He exchanged a knowing look with Jazz, over the set's slim crystal spires. "Game has barely begun."

A game of *hax*, between two evenly matched players, could take several orns to finish. This one, Soundwave could already tell, might take even longer. In the space of a joor, each of them had only made one move.

He stood. "Rumble, Frenzy, prepare for data upload. Game will continue tomorrow."

That game, anyway. As for the other game - if Soundwave had not happened to glance at Jazz in just the right moment, he might have missed it. A brief, but entirely genuine, look of disappointment flitted across Jazz's face.

---

The twins were testy. So were all of the cassettes, actually. Jazz had been quite right in addressing them as 'strangers'; ever since he'd come home that night with Soundwave, his symbiotes had made a point of lingering in the loft as little as possible. They returned at the end of their shift with surveillance to upload, and promptly left. Not a one of them had chosen to recharge inside Soundwave, if in the loft at all. Soundwave indulged their behavior, knowing how upset they were, but he could not allow it to continue indefinitely.

"Finished!" Rumble and Frenzy popped back into their root modes and turned toward the door in the same motion, clearly intent on getting away.

"Not yet dismissed."

"It's not as if any of it needs explaining. Seekers show off any way they can, Starscream bitches about anything he can, and oh yeah, the Combaticons are taking off again. We're all *so* sure they'll get it right this time. It's business as usual. We'll be going now."

"Not yet dismissed," Soundwave repeated, every word frosted over with cold authority. Reluctantly Rumble and Frenzy stopped stomping toward the door, but they didn't make any move back towards Soundwave either.

"We're in a hurry," Frenzy muttered. "Got lots of, you know, hanging around to do."

"Yeah, graffiti's not going to paint itself," Rumble added.

"Absence, noted."

"Well, gee, Soundwave, it's just been so very crowded around here lately... we figured we were better off swinging with the Iacon nightscene."

"Absence will not continue. Tomorrow, recharge here."

"But we -"

"Not negotiable."

"You expect us to sit around and watch while you, what? Beat your new slave into submission with a hax strategy? Couldn't you at least just frag him and leave him chained to your berth? That's what all the other guys do to their slaves!"

"Autobot, irrelevant. You will recharge here. With me. Symbiotic connection strained without synchronization."

"Don't we all know it," Rumble retorted sharply, then winced at Soundwave's unseen reaction. "Uh, I mean- slaggit. Look, we'll stay in if that's what you want. Just don't make us talk to him or anything."

"Conversation with Autobot unnecessary. Order is given. Dismissed."

They flounced out of the room, waves of anger, distrust, and especially *worry* rolling through their intangible link. If they said anything to Jazz on their way out, he didn't hear it.

Echoes of feelings could go both ways, in his connection to the cassettes, and Rumble and Frenzy had left with him traces of their own upset. He stayed in his console room long after they'd left, analyzing their new data, allowing the familiar routine of his job to calm him down. By the time he left, it was quite late and Jazz was already in the berth. Soundwave thought him already offline until he spoke.

"They're never here. That's not normal, is it?"

Soundwave ignored the question, tracing a fingertip along Jazz's arm. "Soundwave, five."

Jazz nudged his arm away from Soundwave's touch, though not with much force. "What are you talking about?"

"Saw it."

"Saw what?" he mumbled sleepily. His systems were slowing, indicative of the approaching recharge.

"Disappointment, when I left."

"Liar."

"Lying, unnecessary, never practiced."

"Deluded, then. As if I..." His voice was dwindling in volume, almost unintelligible.

"Wouldeverlet..."

There was no more; he'd dropped offline. Soundwave gathered his slave in his arms, and did the same.

---

"Move to the left! Left, you fragger, go now!"

"Can't, monster!"

"Shoot it! Kill it!"

"Wait, I got somethin' better."

"Wha- oh, slag!"

The force of the explosion reverberated throughout the loft, thanks to the exquisite sound system of the console. Frenzy huffed.

"A grenade was a little overkill, dontcha think?"

"Worked, didn't it?"

"Moron."

A tiny sigh escaped Soundwave's vents. As ordered, the twins were staying in for the night, but they had no intention of going down quietly. So to speak. Rumble and Frenzy were playing their video game at a decibel level well over his preferred limit, and doing it purposefully. The noise was unrelenting, interfering somewhat with his concentration.

Jazz didn't seem bothered. Compared to the cycle before, he appeared to be in... well, perhaps not a good mood, but at least not as distressed and anxious. Spending his free time working on the puzzle datapad Soundwave had given him must have helped after all. Now he was absorbed in the unfolding hax game, studying the board intently, unfazed by explosive sound effects. This irritated Soundwave. It was an irritation built on that morning, when Soundwave woke up to find Jazz on the far side of the berth again. How did he keep doing that? Soundwave fell into recharge with both arms wrapped firmly around Jazz. It was beyond him how Jazz managed to keep wriggling free without ever waking him. He could order Jazz not to do it, but then Jazz would know it upset him and win another point.

The game was growing more complicated.

"Soundwave."

He returned his attention to Jazz, puzzled by his expectant look. "Move, yours."

"I know, but..." He nodded his head at Soundwave's hand. Sometime while he hadn't noticed, his fingers had begun to drum against the table. Promptly Soundwave withdrew his hand and laced his fingers together, a little discomfited. It was not like him to engage in such a telling habit, and Jazz's grin did not help.

"Noise gettin' to ya? You can just tell Glitchy and Twitchy to take a hike."

"We heard that!"

"I was under the impression you boys were trying to ignore me," Jazz drawled, leaning back in his chair and still not taking his optics off the hax set.

"We are ignoring you," Rumble huffed. "But you still better watch your mouth, *slave*."

Jazz didn't react in any visible way to the word, but something about it unsettled Soundwave anyway.

"Rumble. Frenzy."

"What?"

"Lower volume."

"But we -"

"Lower volume."

"Fiiiine." They managed to make it sound like the world's most onerous chore. But the sound of dying monsters and laser blasts did drop a few merciful notches. Idly Jazz toyed with one of the pieces, still contemplating his move. Meanwhile, Soundwave's chronometer alerted him that it was feeding time.

"Open mouth."

"Can't it wait? I'm trying to concentrate."

Soundwave wondered if he would have to repeat himself all night, to this household of disobedient and troublesome little mechs. "Open mouth."

He held out the energon, halfway over the set, and with a resigned air Jazz tipped forward and leaned over the set. Every joor Soundwave carefully monitored his reaction, and was confident that his slave's revulsion was beginning to diminish. When he ate out of Soundwave's hand, now, it was with something like habitual indifference.

A strangled squeak of dismay from the couch informed Soundwave that the action had been witnessed. Optics flaring bright with anxiety, Frenzy elbowed Rumble.

"Hey, wha-" The complaint cut off with a suddenness that meant Frenzy was telling Rumble what he'd just seen over their private comm channel, hands gesticulating with distress. In a few seconds, Rumble's optics were blazing too.

*"What the hell was that?"* both of them demanded, simultaneous and frantic, over the general channel.

*"Autobot, not your concern,"* Soundwave reminded them, rather shortly. Jazz flicked a glance at the twins as he sat back down, then at Soundwave, probably deducing what was going on.

*"That's what the box from Mixmaster was for, wasn't it?"*

*"Not your concern."*

*"Soundwave, he can feed himself! This isn't like -"*

"Silence," he commanded aloud, punctuating the word with such force that the twins flinched.

*"Your game waits. Return to it."*

Fuming, the twins turned back to their console, but from the lackluster performance of their avatars Soundwave suspected they were concentrating more on a private conversation.

Jazz leaned forward, visor shimmering with fascination, and dropped his voice to a nearly inaudible murmur. "Are you ever going to tell me why they don't want me here? Or do I get to figure it out for myself?"

"Not your concern."

"Whatever you say, master."

Jazz tucked away a thoughtful little smile, and returned his gaze to the set. Again he reached for the same piece, still a little indecisive, but at least this time he actually picked it up. Turning it over and over within his hand, he hovered it between two likely paths, and just when it seemed like he was going to choose one, Soundwave's console pinged with an incoming call.

Jazz made an exasperated noise. "Are you kidding me?"

"Lord Megatron waits." Soundwave stood, and Jazz slumped back into his chair.

"Well don't let me keep you. Tyranny - I mean, duty - calls."

Soundwave retreated into his work room, door sliding shut and cutting off all unwelcome noise. The press of a button opened the connection, and the screen lit up with Megatron's face.

"Soundwave!"

"Lord Megatron-"

"Starscream's been yapping for two cycles about your surveillance team on his personal estate. He won't shut up about it. Has your team been recording him?"

"Yes, Lord Megatron. Desist?"

"Of course not," Megatron said scathingly. "It's Starscream. You know I want him on a short leash. Just don't let him *catch* you. Starscream is all that's keeping those winged twits in line, and he knows it. I don't want a squadron of crosswired Seekers running amok on my Cybertron, so smack a little sense into those obnoxious spies of yours and make sure that next time, they don't let themselves be seen."

For the second time that night, Soundwave vented a small sigh. "Understood, Lord Megatron."

"I think you've been skulking in solitude long enough. Come to the command center tomorrow, I've been getting distress reports from Earth."

"Yes, Lord Megatron."

Megatron cut the connection, ending the conversation without so much as a farewell, plunging the work room into both silence and darkness. When Soundwave opened the door again, bright light and noise slammed into him.

"Rumble, Frenzy, end game. Recharge now."

"Now?" they echoed, in a perfectly matched whine. "But it's not even -"

"Now."

They shared a look, probably a few private words too, and without further protest switched off their game. Jazz was giving him that speculative look again.

"I don't think that call made you very happy, Soundwave."

"Not your concern."

"Isn't it? Should I be getting ready for another bath?"

"Hey, Autobot," Frenzy snapped. "Shut your mouth, and learn how to mind your own business."

Something in Jazz's visor flashed, and Frenzy was suddenly the object of close concentration. "*Le petit défend. Intéressant.*"

Frenzy, who had, like most other Cons, only ever bothered to download English while on Earth, gaped blankly at Jazz. "Huh?"

"Recharge now," Soundwave repeated, almost urgently, and opened his chest in expectation.

Frenzy shot another baffled - and highly suspicious - look at Jazz before obediently folding down into cassette mode and slotting into Soundwave alongside his brother.

The quiet that followed was a blessed relief, but for Jazz and the way he so carefully studied Soundwave. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were in a hurry to tuck those little guys in."

Soundwave extended a hand. "Come."

"How does it work, with the remoras in there?" Jazz stood, which put him at optic level with the glass, and tried to peer through. "Can they hear me? Can they hear this?" He tapped a fingertip against the glass in a deliberately irritating rhythm, until Soundwave snatched his wrist.

"No more talking."

"Well I would say 'yes, master', but that would mean spea- mmpf."

Soundwave didn't exactly slap his hand over Jazz's mouth, but once it was there he tightened his grip to just firm enough that Jazz couldn't jerk his head free. Though he tried. Pulling his arm along with the other hand, Soundwave steered Jazz into his own chamber. Immediately he brought the lights down to a soft glow, easing that ache in his visual sensors. Jazz's systems hitched in surprise when Soundwave picked him up and sat him on the edge of the berth. Again he tried to speak and again Soundwave clamped down with his hand. He was tired - tired of disobedience, tired of complaints, tired of noise. If he had to go into recharge with his hand still locked down over Jazz's mouth, he would have *quiet*.

Jazz's vents had all opened, cycling air a little faster in his nervousness. He stopped trying to pry Soundwave's hand off his face and subsided, waiting and watching for what would come next. Lightly, gently, Soundwave moved Jazz's hand to the transformation seam on his own shoulder.

Promptly Jazz jerked his hand away, shaking his head. Soundwave re-established his grasp with more pressure, and brought their hands back to his shoulder. Somewhere low in Jazz's vocalizer he keened in distress.

Soundwave paid it no mind. With his trademark patience he glided Jazz's hand along the seam, slow and soft, relishing his touch. The light in Jazz's visor extinguished; he would not look, no matter what Soundwave forced him to do tonight. Someday Soundwave would make sure he did look, but for now this was enough. Their hands moved in along the crest of his shoulder, and Soundwave forced Jazz to stroke one of the exposed wires in his neck. Electricity swirled in tiny currents through his body, and he could feel his armor relaxing in anticipation of more.

Light as smoke Soundwave moved their hands down over his chest, skimming over glass, to the mid-torso seam. Jazz squirmed and whimpered when his fingertips were pushed inside, stimulating another wave of thrills in Soundwave's circuits. Jazz must be feeling the electrical surge, surely it felt good, but armor shut tight and muffled whines spoke otherwise.

Soundwave, at least, was enjoying himself. Every touch of Jazz's hand brought another flush of pleasure, evaporating his stress into the night. He closed in, maneuvering between Jazz's knees, drawing in his warmth. A couple of his own internal fans kicked on, in response to rising temperatures, and Jazz flinched at the sound. He kept trying to lean back, but Soundwave's grip on his face held him in place.

He kept up the stroking just long enough, until all his irritation had dissolved away. Stiff, unwilling touches were not enough to bring Soundwave to overload, not even close, but this was pleasant enough for now. Soundwave released Jazz and tipped forward, climbing onto the berth while a gasping Jazz tried to scramble backwards and out from underneath him. He wasn't fast enough, still trapped between Soundwave's massive arms, but he didn't drop his full weight upon Jazz again. He only dipped his head to the crook between neck and shoulder, taking one last moment to savor the



steady hum of Jazz's systems, before he shifted and lay down at Jazz's side.

Kliks passed, and after a few shudders, Jazz seemed to understand they were through for the night. His intakes calmed, and his trembling eased off. But if Soundwave had harbored any hope that the session would distract Jazz, he was mistaken.

"I called it wrong," Jazz whispered into the darkness. "They're not looking at me like I'm going to stab them in the back. They're looking like I'm going to stab *you* in the back. *Intéressant.*"

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on caste

The younger twins took the news that they were expected to recharge at home about as well as the others did, which is to say that Buzzsaw screeched something nasty at Jazz. Then he snapped his beak at him, just to get the message across.

"Well good morning to you too," Jazz said tartly, then fixed Soundwave with a knowing look. "Like I said. Protective."

"*Buzzsaw, enough*," Soundwave commanded, and unhappily the symbiote ducked his head between the arch of his wings. For the twins the gesture indicated resentment, not contrition, and Soundwave didn't miss the guttural clucking deep in his throat. Laserbeak, as usual, tried to amend her brother's animosity via physical affection. Chirping softly, she rubbed her head along Soundwave's jaw, but she could still feel her master's irritation. While Buzzsaw sulked, she dropped off Soundwave's shoulder and glided across the room like a flake of ash. Jazz, who was already camped out in the corner with his precious puzzles, froze when she alit on his knee.

"Oh," he squeaked. "Hello there. I'm feeling rather alarmed now, Soundwave."

"Remain still."

"But I like my fingers."

"Laserbeak, curious. Not hostile."

It was strictly true, though Soundwave did not mention the strong distrust radiating through her link. Laserbeak did not want this Autobot here more than any of them did, but of all his cassettes, she was always first to try and please him. Perched on Jazz's knee, she cocked her head from side to side and examined Jazz closely, her finely tuned optics zooming in and out. Jazz didn't twitch so much as a strut, vents silent and watching her warily. He didn't even move when she stretched her neck out and tapped him inquisitively on the face with her beak.

"*Traitor*," Buzzsaw muttered.

"*Hush*," she replied impatiently. "*Healthy. Pleases Master. Not enough?*"

Buzzsaw turned his beak up disdainfully, and did not answer. Laserbeak cycled air from her vents, and pushed off Jazz to return to Soundwave. Jazz sagged against the wall with undisguised relief.

"Did Laserbeak just... kiss me?"

"Negative," Soundwave assured him. "Laserbeak, Buzzsaw, prepare for data upload. Recharge after."

Buzzsaw was still feeling a bit huffy, but there was no more argument as he keyed open the door to his console room. "Have a good day, mon cheri," Jazz sang, and both twins stood up straight on his shoulders.

"*What?*"

"*Ignore.*"

---

It took just over one joor to upload all surveillance data from the twins, another two to properly sort and analyze it. Soundwave did a more thorough job than usual, leaving no stray communication unturned, but at last he had to admit the morning's work was complete. There could be no more putting it off; it was time to report to the command center. With the twins nestled inside his chest and peacefully recharging, he stood and left the console room.

Jazz was sprawled out on his front, legs kicking back and forth, tapping solutions into his data pad. "Finished spying for the day? I'm ready to play when you are."

"Hax, unable to play now. Presence at Decepticon Command required."

Jazz's head jerked up sharply, puzzles forgotten. "Command center? We're going out?"

"Negative. Your presence unnecessary; you remain here."

"Stay here? Alone?" Soundwave was turning toward the front door when Jazz threw himself at it, with some remarkable alacrity. Hands braced against each side of the frame, as if he could somehow block Soundwave from leaving. "You can't leave and not take me with you, that's not fair! I haven't been outside since I saw Hook, not even for a klik!"

"Fairness irrelevant," Soundwave replied, moderately startled by Jazz's reaction. "Your presence unnecessary."

"But you could take me. Don't you want to? Show me off, maybe? Skywarp took me everywhere, loved the bragging rights."

"Similarities to Skywarp, zero," Soundwave reminded Jazz, rather flatly. "Bragging unnecessary."

"Oh, c'mon, Soundwave, *please*." Distress indicators were spiking again, Jazz's anxiety growing rapidly. Soundwave ran a quick scan, checking his spark pulse, and nervously noted its elevated rate. This was another of those factors that strongly affected his slave's temperament. While he hesitated, Jazz thought of something else.

"Will you be gone for more than one joor?"

"Likely."

"Then who will feed me? I'll go hungry. Unless, you're willing to leave behind the energon for me to, ya know, feed myself."

Now Soundwave was torn. He was strongly disinclined to bring Jazz into Decepticon headquarters, but the joorly routine of handfeeding was important. It was through this that Jazz was becoming accustomed to his touch. As if to demonstrate it to himself, Soundwave raised an idle hand to stroke Jazz's face. Jazz still scowled and tilted his head away, but it was a conscious movement; at last he no longer flinched away in frightened reflex. Soundwave would not stop feeding him now, not when he was making progress. And in any case, it was an appealing thought that Jazz was begging to stay at his side. Practically, Soundwave knew it had more to do with the freedom to stretch his legs and see new scenery, but the end result was the same.

"Permission granted. You will accompany me."

"Yes! Jazz three!"

"Good behavior expected."

"I'll be good," Jazz promised, pantomiming sealing his own mouth shut. "You'll hardly know I'm there."

"Fetch chains."

A little of his elation died, but Jazz obediently moved away from the door. Most Decepticons kept their slaves in chains constantly, but Jazz hadn't worn his since the trip to Hook. He was so weak and sleepy, at first, that it seemed redundant. Even after his energy returned, Soundwave indulged Jazz and kept him unchained. He was far less defensive without them. To go without them in public, however, was out of the question. No Autobot was permitted to walk the streets without chains or his master.

Jazz returned with the restraints in question, and not a flicker of any sort of expression crossed his face as Soundwave fastened them to his collar.

"Good behavior," he reminded his slave. "Walk."

The distance was not great; Soundwave's loft was within the spark of re-awakening Iacon and not far from Megatron's complex. But the walk there, right in the middle of Cybertron's active cycle, was... different than it had been in the past. That he deigned to walk, when in the past he would have simply flown, was one reason. The stares were another.

Soundwave was a private mech. He kept to himself and preferred it that way, his little symbiotes the only company he wanted or needed. And though he may be one of Megatron's top officers, member of the ruling Decepticon elite, he did not openly flaunt his power across all Cybertron like Starscream did. The result was that few neutrals even knew what he looked like. *Soundwave* was the reason that any mech dropped his voice to a whisper if he dared speak ill of Megatron, it was a name known and feared by all, but his appearance went unremarked whenever he ventured outside. He was accustomed to his obscurity, and liked it.

This time was different. The neutrals stared as he passed, pointing and flagging one another with quick short-wave comms. All because of Jazz, trotting along at his elbow with an occasional clink of the chains. Everyone knew that only the most valuable of Megatron's forces had been granted an Autobot slave after the war, the strongest of his warriors and sharpest of his officers. To have a slave at one's side was a potent symbol of status. Soundwave sensed the mixture of fear and awe around him, without even consciously trying, and did his best to ignore it. Jazz didn't seem to notice the extra attention. Probably, always in Skywarp's shadow, he was used to it.

Neutrals... they shouldn't even be called that anymore, now that the war was over, but Megatron would not suffer to let them be called Decepticons, not when they'd done nothing to fight for him.

They were the ones the Decepticons saved, waking up from their long stasis slumbers with the fuel won on Earth. In his meticulous, methodical way Shockwave had taken care of the task, first waking up his own old contacts and partners from Kaon. Then engineers and architects to rebuild factories, and so on in order until by the time the last batch had been roused all the land and buildings were taken and they had no choice but to work for those who came first. It was an unlucky lot in life, but it was still life, and they worshipped Megatron and his Decepticons all the same. Quick to avert their optics whenever Soundwave caught them staring, they ducked their heads and scurried out of his path like the drones they were.

Soundwave found their presence trying, their impertinent stares even more so. Not halfway there he stopped, and swept a startled Jazz into his arms.

"Wha- hey!"

Soundwave kicked one heel against the street and his thrusters roared to life, rocketing them both off the surface of the planet. Jazz clutched at Soundwave and froze, but made no more noise until Soundwave touched down at the broad entrance of the command center. He managed to push himself out of Soundwave's arms before he had the chance to set him down properly.

"Thanks for the *warning*. Next time you decide you can't stand it down there with the rest of the peasants, give a mech a moment's notice."

"Heights, frightening?"

"Not hardly." Jazz tossed him a withering look. "Skywarp flies higher, and faster. It's the being carried that I don't like. Do we have to do that?"

"Flying faster, more efficient. Preferable to ground travel."

"Maybe to you." Jazz tugged unhappily at the chains that linked to his collar, the collar that kept him from transforming. He'd been trapped in his root mode since the orn it was put on him. "You can count me out."

"Demand declined," Soundwave said dismissively. "Autobot will join me when I choose to fly. No argument." Jazz was looking a shade petulant, and Soundwave tipped up his chin with just enough force to remind him of his place, fixing him with a cool stare.

"Preference: remain at home?"

"No." Jazz tried to tug his head clear, but Soundwave wasn't quite ready to let go yet. "No, I want to be here. Master," he added, when Soundwave waited a few silent nanokliks. Satisfied, Soundwave released him, and continued toward the entrance.

"Follow."

The Decepticons were not much better than the neutrals. Worse, perhaps, since they all knew exactly who he was and had every reason to be more cautious in their pointing and gossiping.

Soundwave devoured the halls in his long strides, not lowering himself to glance aside when he sensed a curious stare. Really, they ought to have known better.

"Are you fraggin' kiddin' me?"

Speaking of mechs that ought to know better...

Rumble stood athwart the corridor, fists on his hips, a picture of exasperated disbelief. The elder twins were not much for lowering their voices, for all they were supposed to be spies, and every Decepticon within audioshot looked up. Soundwave paused, acutely conscious of the attention, and pointedly addressed his subordinate via comlink.

*"Observe manners in Command Center, Rumble."*

*"Oh, excuse me. Are you fraggin' kiddin' me... sir? Are you out of your mind, sir? What in the flaming smolten Pit is **he** doing here? Sir?"*

*"Behaving himself much better than you are,"* Soundwave could not resist answering, and sensed Rumble's flare of anger in response. *"Autobot with me because I wish it. Not your concern."*

*"You couldn't even leave him behind for just a few joors? Have you been apart from him since the orn you got him? Even once?"*

His anger was becoming eclipsed by a rapidly swelling anxiety, and Soundwave hastily tried to quell it with a surge of reassurance.

*"Affirmative. Autobot spent majority of one work cycle with Hook. Satisfied?"*

Soundwave already knew that he was not, but the mention of Hook did have the desired response of getting Rumble to back off his aggression. His mood shifted from angry to sulky. The comlink channel had just signaled his forthcoming reply when they were interrupted.

"Primus above, if it isn't Megatron's hermit, ventured from his hole to mingle with the rest of the Decepticons. I am honored!" Starscream's unmistakable voice carried through the halls with unfortunate clarity, and Rumble groaned out loud. Soundwave agreed, but outwardly he remained impassive. Starscream was strutting toward them, wings jutting out at an obnoxious angle that forced aside other mechs, his little red slave scurrying along in his wake. "And just think, Soundwave, I was starting to wonder if you had become afraid of the open sky. Or perhaps conversation? Well, I think we all knew conversation was never your greatest strength, though you're certainly expert enough at listening in on everybody else's."

"Presence required in head command room," Soundwave said coolly. "Suggestion: move aside."

Starscream did not, his splashy red and white wings blocking Soundwave's path and all but twitching with hostility. "I've lodged a complaint with Megatron about your little minions trespassing upon my estate, Soundwave." He shot a dirty look at Rumble, and got an equally dirty one in return. "I hope for all their sakes that I don't catch another one there. Is that going to happen?"

"Megatron's new orders given," Soundwave replied, neatly evading the question without lying. Unlike Starscream, Soundwave did not ever have to lie. "Will be followed."

Starscream uttered a scratchy grunt, somehow managing to sound dismissive and suspicious at the same time. Narrowed optics searched Soundwave for any hint of treachery, then happened to fall on Jazz. "Oh, that's right... I'd almost forgotten. You stole a toy from one of my seekers, didn't you?"

"Autobot not stolen, won fairly."

"Whatever you say, reader of minds. I'm just surprised that you even wanted a new slave. Maybe this time you'll actually be able to keep him ali-"

"Hey Screamer!" Rumble snapped, hovering protectively in front of Soundwave and ignoring the difference in height as he glowered up at the massive Starscream. "That your paint job? Or did Thundercracker just get red paint stuck in his exhaust vents and sneeze on you?"

Most of their audience snickered, and Starscream hissed. "Little pest. Haven't you learned yet to show respect to your commanding officers?"

"Guess if I was talking to *my* commanding officer, I'd worry about that."

Starscream scowled at Rumble, but a vain mech did have his weaknesses, and he couldn't resist glancing sideways at his wing. What he saw made his dermal plating darken with fury.

"Slave!"

"Master?" Timidly Perceptor crept closer, head ducked low in submission.

"There is a *paint splotch on my wing stripe!*"

"R-really? I'm sorry, I was being careful -" Starscream smacked his slave in the head and Perceptor stumbled, smothering a tiny squeak of pain. "I'm sorry, Master Starscream! I tried my best, I'll do better next time!"

"You will, or I'll make you drink the paint. It doesn't do for Cybertron's Air Commander to appear in public with less than perfect wings. Unless you want me to be embarrassed. Is that what you want?"

Perceptor shook his head frantically. "No, master." He cringed when Starscream raised his hand again, but all Starscream did was take hold of his chin, then push him back a step.

"Incompetent," muttered Starscream. He threw another nasty glare at Soundwave, ignoring Rumble's giggles. "Enjoy your new slave, Soundwave. You're the last Decepticon on the planet to do so."

Nearly clipping Soundwave with a wingtip, he whirled around and stalked away. Watching Decepticons drifted away or turned back to their conversations, and some of Soundwave's tension eased. Jazz reached out and snagged Perceptor's hand, squeezing it gently.

"Alright there, Perce?"

"Jazz." Perceptor looked at Jazz blankly, as if he'd only just now noticed his presence, optics shuttering a few times to refocus. "Oh... yes, that's right, you're with Soundwave now. I do remember Skywarp screaming about it. I-I've missed you."

"I've missed everybody." Gently Jazz bumped his forehead against Perceptor's in mute affection. "How is it, Percy? Are you holding up?"

"I'm... trying." Perceptor's voice shrunk to a whisper. "I try... very hard to make him happy, Jazz. But I'm not the scientist he wanted, and we both know it. He hates me for existing."

"Then you get to annoy him just by waking up in the morning. Good for you." Jazz grinned and bopped his fist lightly against Perceptor's chin. "Some of us have to work so much harder."

Perceptor managed a weak smile. He was opening his mouth to speak when Starscream's shrill voice echoed down the hall.

"Slave!"

He jumped and dashed away, Jazz reluctantly releasing his grip on Perceptor's hand at the very last moment. Soundwave watched him carefully.

"Starscream's comment, explain."

"Hmm? Well, if I had to guess, I'd say Starscream doesn't like it too much when you and your team spy on him. But if you need me to explain that, maybe you do need to get out more."

Jazz flashed him that cheeky grin, and Soundwave refused to show any irritation.

"Other comment."

"Seekers share, Soundwave." The smile remained in place, though something in the visor shifted.

"They share *everything*. Didn't you have a tyrant to report to?"

Megatron was expecting him, true. Soundwave turned back the way Starscream had gone, resuming his walk. "Remain close."

"Afraid I'll run away? I thought we'd already established I can't do that." Jazz pulled ahead, walking backwards to keep his gaze on Soundwave. "Or is it your fellow Decepticons you don't trust?"

"Why don't you just shut up and do what he says?" piped up an irritated Rumble. "Like you're supposed to."

"So you do want me here! I wasn't too sure."

"No, I -"

"Nice work on that diversion, by the way. Went straight for Screamer's vanity, expertly done." Jazz clucked in an approving manner and shuttered half his visor in a wink, and Rumble almost tripped over his own feet in surprise. He was fumbling for something to say when Soundwave clapped a firm hand on Jazz's shoulder, forced him to turn back around, and steered him through the doorway into Decepticon central command. As a warning, Soundwave pressed a single finger against Jazz's mouth, and shook his head.

Jazz nodded. Silent in every sense of the word, he backed into the nearest wall and stayed there. Just in time.

"Soundwave!" Megatron barked. "At last. I've been waiting for you."

---

"... thought it was just the humans bitching and whining again, but then the whining *stopped*. I had Dead End check things out with a satellite, just to see why everything got so quiet."

Motormaster's holographic depiction shrugged. "See for yourself."

A perfect three-dimensional image of Earth appeared over the table, and Soundwave tapped a button. Satellite captures popped open in rapid-fire succession, each one sharper in detail than the last. First Asia, then the Indonesian archipelago, then Makassar zoomed closer. Several highly defined images littered the holo-range, showing in perfect clarity the darkened buildings and silent streets. Lightpoles had been broken- or rather, gnawed in half. A power plant had been reduced to shreds. In the one video window, trash skittered over the pavement, and nothing else moved.

Megatron didn't twitch, but his dermal plating had gone tight. "The entire city?"

"From what I can tell. Breakdown's been watching the screen for two days; says he ain't seen nothing but some mongrel dogs fighting in the streets."

"How far is this city from the Guinea island?"



"Five hours maybe... as the grasshopper flies."

More pictures crowded into the table's spread. The tropical jungle surrounding the city had been annihilated, trees splintered and chewed through, the earth torn and scarred from forcible uprooting. The swathe was wide, and led due east.

A low growl reverberated in Megatron's frame. "Soundwave, find me a recording. Audio, video, I don't care, just tell me if it was them."

"Yes, Lord Megatron." Soundwave's fingers moved rapidly across the console, scanning Earth's internet with practiced ease. Rumble needed no instructions, and started sifting through likely files to set aside for Soundwave's scrutiny.

"Why bother?" Starscream asked airily. "You know it was the Insecticons. Disgusting pests will eat *anything*, including apparently, whole chunks of your empire. You should have terminated them all when the war ended."

"Shut up, Starscream."

"Surveillance camera feed discovered. Insecticon activity, confirmed." Soundwave played the clip in question. The video file had been corrupted, but they could all hear the unmistakeable high-pitched shrieks of rampaging Insecticons. Megatron's growl deepened.

"I told you," Starscream sang, smirk turned up to full volume. "They're insatiable. I knew they'd never keep to that little island you gave them, not when there's nothing and no one to stop them from ravaging all those around it. Why you even thought -"

Telltale whirring and clicking signaled activation of Megatron's cannon. "Shut *up*, Starscream."

"Am I wrong?" Starscream leaned forward over the holo-table, hands flat against the surface to brace himself. "Would it have been so hard to lock the filthy beasts in a smelter when you had the chance? You never take the opportunity to -"

"It is because of the Insecticons that we took South Asia in the first place," Megatron snarled. "I don't like conniving, vicious, greedy soldiers, but when they win I prefer to keep them alive. You of all mechs should be grateful for it."

Starscream's optics glittered. "Very well, mighty Megatron. You let the pests live, and now they're devouring Earth's nasty organic jungles - five hours *west* of the island they're supposed to be on. Suppose they decide to keep going west? Suppose they develop a craving for fuel a little more pure? Suppose they raid one of our energon wells in the Gulf states?"

"Then I stomp on them," Motormaster spoke up, engine revving with battlelust. "Like the bugs they are. Ain't nothing I can't handle, if those critters want a fight."

Megatron's optics moved from smug Starscream to confident, deadly Motormaster. Finally they rested on the dozen pictures of the ruined island.

"Soundwave. Hack into whatever channel the beasts are using these days and deliver them a message. Tell them their lord Megatron sends his greetings, and hopes that they have enjoyed their meal. Also, that if they dare trespass on what's mine again, I will come for them and rip their overactive fuel tanks directly out of their bodies. This is their only warning. Have you got all that?"

"Understood, Lord Megatron. Message encoded, delivering now."

"Because of course they'll listen," Starscream muttered under the hum of his systems, and promptly yelped when Megatron's fist swung up and clipped him on the jaw.

"Talk to me about energon output." Megatron hadn't even taken his eyes off Motormaster, ignoring Starscream's hissed curses. "Are the wells holding steady?"

"Thousand cubes every wee- per orn," Motormaster quickly corrected himself. "Steady like the highway. Don't let none of the slaves recharge 'til it's in."

"Behaving themselves?"

"More or less." Purple optics gleamed at some unseen amusement. "Had a little trouble with the big red one, a while back, but he shut up pretty quick when I put his sparkmate under the whip. It was fun."

"Do have a care to keep them alive, Stunticon," Shockwave chided. "Energy production depends on our slave labor, and there are too few Autobots as it is."

"Don't get your wires in a twist," Motormaster drawled, in a deliberate show of disrespect that made Shockwave tense. "They're fine; all of 'em still kicking. Kicking *and* screaming, when I do it right. But you wouldn't know about that; you like 'em meek."

Shockwave's lone optic flashed in a brief show of irritation, all the expression that he would ever show.

"Leaving the question of taste - or lack thereof - aside, you will be held liable for any permanent damage to the labor force of the Decepticon Empire. Those slaves do not belong to you, Earth Commander Motormaster. Try to remember that in the berth."

"Enough," Megatron broke in, irritably. "Unless one of them does die, I don't care about it. Anything else to report, Motormaster?"

Motormaster hesitated. "Actually..."

"Well? What?"

"There is one thing." From his end of the connection he flicked a switch, dismissing all the satellite caps and then summoning one fresh one. The setting was an unremarkable one; just another human settlement in central Asia, drab and dusty as all the others. There was really just one color that stood out. Megatron's optics locked onto it, devouring the picture with rapt fascination.

"Slave!"

Soundwave's audios caught a faint scuffle in the lower level of the command room. Ever since his arrival he'd kept a slim sliver of his attention on Jazz, though he needn't have worried. His slave was making good on his word, and had done nothing except curl up quietly in the corner with the other Autobots. Now Bluestreak had to squirm free of Jazz's arms, nearly tripping in his haste to scramble up to the officers' level. When he did, he dropped to his hands and knees before Megatron, telltale doorwings trembling with fear.

"Up." Bluestreak scrambled to his feet, systems running at too high a pitch. Slaves were not often called up to this level, with so much classified information spread about, and Soundwave had no need of telepathy to sense the barely-muted panic radiating off the small bot. Megatron gripped his helm in one massive hand and forced Bluestreak to look at the satellite cap. "Is that who I think it is?"

Bluestreak's optics took in the picture and flashed with recognition, but when he opened his mouth no sound came out. Uncertainly he whined, and Megatron's mouth stretched into a cruel smile.

"Yes, I give you permission to speak. Is that who I think it is?"

Shaking harder, Bluestreak nodded. "Yes, master. Th-that is, if you th-think it's Sideswipe, because it is and I didn't even kn-know he was on Earth I swear I didn't and I don't know why he is -"

"Permission withdrawn."

Bluestreak snapped his mouth shut hard, gaze fixed piteously on the image.

"So here is the missing twin at last," Megatron purred. "Imagine, he was hiding on Earth all this time. Or did he just return because he had nowhere else to go? Silly to think he could hide from me there. He certainly can't run. He's trapped on the little mudball and mine for the taking." Idly he stroked Bluestreak on the back of his neck, and his slave shivered.

"But my lord," Shockwave spoke up. "It's a suspicious circumstance. Surely he must have known he'd be seen, like this." Indeed, the sleek red vehicle amongst a filthy bazaar of tents was impossible to miss.

"I agree, Megatron," Starscream chimed in. "It has to be a trick."

"One of the last of the uncaptured Autobots in hiding, no army to back him up, not even his own brother. What trick do I have to fear? I think he's just lonely and desperate to reunite with his brother. I want to reunite them as well. I do like a matched set, after all. Somebody tell the Combaticons to get their filthy hides over to Earth, now."

"Combaticons, departed Cybertron," Soundwave reminded him. "Currently searching solar system, designation X-393."

Megatron scowled. "That's right, I'd forgotten. Motormaster, you'll have to take care of it. Find the mech and bring him to me... mostly unharmed will do."

Motormaster's engine revved again, a little lower-pitched. "Lord Megatron, you know there's

nothing more I'd love than to hunt down a rogue Autobot. But that's Afghan territory; there's thousands of caves and underground tunnels. Even the five of us couldn't explore all of it, and we have to stay at the mines to control the slaves. Awful roads anyway. The Combaticons would be much -"

"But the Combaticons are not here," Megatron interrupted briskly. "And there you are, on Earth, with one of the last of the enemy hiding just a stone's throw away from you. You're not afraid to face him, are you?"

"I'm not afraid of anything! I'm just saying we can't -"

"I don't like the word *can't*, Motormaster." Bluestreak smothered a whimper when Megatron's grip on his neck tightened. "Can't is all I've been hearing from that pathetic has-been gestalt team ever since the war ended. And now they've got no estate on Cybertron, no standing, no future. Is that you want for your team?"

Motormaster slumped a little. "No, my lord."

"So find him. I don't care how. I will not have Autobots hiding on my own lands, particularly not one as dangerous as that one. Present him to me, and perhaps one of those mine slaves you're so keen on could be yours... permanently."

Motormaster's engine rose in pitch, optics glittering with greed. "Any one I choose?"

"Maybe even two. But Sideswipe first. Make it happen."

"Yes, my lord. I'll hunt him down myself."

"Dismissed."

Motormaster bowed his head, and the image flickered out of existence.

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At least, Soundwave reflected, he understood now why Jazz put up such a fuss about coming here with him. His slave's arms were linked loosely around the little Praxian Autobot, hand rubbing in small circles between his doorwings, while Bluestreak clutched at Jazz like his life depended on it. On his other side, Perceptor was slumped miserably against Jazz's shoulder, optics dimmed to their lowest setting. Apparently they found solace in each other's company, even if they were forbidden to talk while in this room. Perhaps too much solace. Jazz was practically smothered between the two bots and seemed quite comfortable there, though Soundwave still woke from every recharge cycle to find him huddled against the far side of the berth.

"Come."

Jazz looked up at the clipped command, shoulders slumping in resignation. He lowered his head and nudged it gently against Bluestreak, the meaning of which Bluestreak seemed to understand right away. He cringed and squeezed at Jazz one final time before loosening his grip, and Jazz untangled himself from his fellow Autobots before following Soundwave out of the room.

"Too much fun already, Soundwave? It's been too long; you should pace yourself. Did you forget what a party Decepticon high command can be?"

Soundwave ignored that and steered Jazz out of the main corridor, into a smaller cross passage that had no traffic. "Open mouth."

Jazz tipped his head back against the wall, disobeying. Soundwave had a feeling Jazz was studying him, from behind that visor.

"Coulda done this back in the command room. Why come out here? It's because you're afraid the other officers will take a shine to the idea and start handfeedin' their slaves too. Yeah, that's it. Certainly not because you don't *want* an audience."

With considerable difficulty Soundwave ignored that too. "Open mouth."

"You're a mech that plays his cards close to the chest, aren't ya? In more ways than one."

Something speculative flashed across the visor, before Jazz at last opened his mouth. Soundwave inserted the small energon treat, but did not step back when the deed was done. He turned his hand over and stroked it softly up and down Jazz's cheek plating, and though Jazz grimaced he did not pull away.

"Behavior, pleasing."

"Told ya I'd be good."

"Result, unexpected."

"Do what I have to do to see my friends."

Soundwave would have preferred to hear that Jazz behaved himself for his sake, not for the sake of his old comrades. Some orn, Soundwave decided, he would. For now, let him cling to the remnants of the Autobot army; at least they kept him quiet.

His absence would be noted, if by no other than Starscream. He dropped his hand and started walking, in silent expectation that Jazz would follow. He did, moving with his customary quiet tread that might have prompted Soundwave to look over his shoulder and check, were it not for the sound of clinking chains. They returned along the main corridor, a passage that emptied into the large antechamber. Just outside the Command Room, it was a popular gathering spot for off-duty (or bored) Decepticons. So it was more inevitability than simple bad luck that they ran into Starscream's personal trine.

Skywarp's optics fell on Jazz, and his engines promptly let out a long, low whistle. "Finer in the finish, Jazz. Lookit who found the water and wax."

Jazz had not been following Soundwave as closely as he should. With the kind of obnoxious disrespect seekers were famous for, Skywarp slipped between him and Soundwave and advanced a few steps, forcing Jazz back. Jazz tipped his chin up, idle smile playing across his features.

"Have we met?"

"Cute. The fresh paint does a great job of covering it all up, slave." Skywarp moved to circle Jazz, optics devouring the seams and gaps in Jazz's armor. "Sorta makes me want to do it to you all over again. You look so very *pretty*."

"You don't."

Skywarp's engine rumbled and his fists tightened, but somehow he managed to remind himself not to

strike. "Keep hiding behind your little jokes, then, but don't get too uppity. A lick of paint and some polish doesn't change what we all know you are: a Decepticon's little - pet - whore."

Jazz stiffened, and Skywarp tossed him a smirk before spinning on his heels to march away. He was perhaps five long steps from Jazz, and Soundwave was reaching for Jazz's elbow, when Jazz spoke.

"I'm sorry, Skywarp, that I can't kiss you again."

His raised voice echoed well in the antechamber; most mechs stopped their conversations and looked up. Skywarp almost tripped over his own feet. "It was sweet of you to ask," Jazz continued, malicious delight dancing across the visor, "but we're over. Accept it! I know you're lonely in the berth at nights, but you'll get over me. Somehow. And one more thing: you're a big seeker. Learn to recharge without a nightlight."

Every mech in the room stared, riveted, while Skywarp's mouth just kept falling open.

"I- I don't..." He gave up fumbling for words and just lunged for Jazz's throat. Soundwave would have intervened at that point but Thundercracker beat him to it, locking his arms around Skywarp's wings and yanking back with all his strength. Jazz did not so much as flinch.

"I wanna kill him!"

"But you can't."

"It'll be quick! And it'll feel so good!"

"No, it surely won't." Thundercracker glanced warily at the stock-still Soundwave and dug his heels into the floor, dragging Skywarp back a pace. "C'mon, Warp, let's jet while you still have half a processor to think with." Skywarp was a large, powerful mech, but so was his wingmate, and said wingmate was used to mechhandling his team when he had to. With a combination of physical force and probable coaxing through comm, he managed to drag Skywarp to the exit. Meanwhile, half the room was stifling giggles. Rumble, off in the corner, had long since collapsed with hysterical laughter.

"Red, let's go!" Thundercracker called, and his slave hesitated. Optics darted from the preoccupied Thundercracker to Soundwave to Jazz, and then Fireflight made up his mind and threw himself against Jazz in a frantic hug. Jazz squeezed him affectionately in return, the two of them savoring a nanoklik of contact before Fireflight tore himself away and raced after his master. Once all three were gone, Jazz linked his hands and stretched, looking terribly pleased with himself.

"Good behavior promised," Soundwave reminded him.

"Oh, but that doesn't count. That was just... unfinished business. Don't pretend to be mad, because I know you're not."

It was true that Soundwave was not really angry. In fact, it was impossible to ignore the sheer hilarity flowing in from Rumble's link. Jazz's antics amused.

"Game, concluded? Victor?"

"You insult me by asking." Jazz skirted around Soundwave, never dropping his gaze. "Skywarp didn't even know we were playing one. No challenge at all."

"And me?"

"I think you know the answer to that." He tipped his head toward the command room. "Shall we?"

---

*"People of Earth, your Lord Megatron greets you. No, I haven't forgotten your insignificant existence, I just find your species far too tedious to pay you much attention. But make no mistake, my Decepticons are watching you."*

*"They report that you are behaving yourselves: keeping to your permitted territories, staying away from my wells, paying my soldiers on Earth with the respect and services they deserve. This pleases me, and that should be a great relief to you. To subjects that know their place and obey their true lord, I am generous. To those subjects that forget their place, I am less so. Recently, I have come to learn that one of the enemy, a renegade Autobot, has been hiding there on your planet. Where, exactly? How long? I don't know. But I do know that your species, so irritatingly numerous and small enough to be everywhere, must have known. Whatever his disguise, whatever his speed, some of you somewhere saw him and you knew. This disappoints me."*

*"You don't want me to be disappointed, little humans. Fragile, delicate, humans. My soldiers are searching Earth now for this Autobot, and you will help them however you are ordered. Should you see the fugitive mech, you will promptly report it. Any human found offering shelter, aid, or fuel to him will be summarily tossed into a volcano, along with your family. Even you humans, with your pitifully short lives and memories, know what I am capable of when I am not feeling generous."*

*"You have your warning. Don't disappoint me again."*

Megatron snapped his fingers and Soundwave ended the recording, bundling the video into a high-resolution packet for transmission to Earth. Decepticon control of the satellites ensured it would appear simultaneously on all media, including the wide-scale holographic projectors over human city skylines. Megatron only rarely bothered to acknowledge his tiny organic subjects, but when he did, he expected them to watch with undivided attention. He also expected them to obey. Earth's humans had a history of working too well with the Autobots, sometimes even providing an unexpected tipping point for victory. He would not let them shelter Sideswipe from his eager grasp.

"If you're through preening to the humans," Starscream sneered, "I will again point out that there is more going on here than what it seems."

"You'd know about preening," Megatron retorted. "Jealous that you couldn't strut before the people of Earth, Starscream? As if you could even bring yourself to do it as you are. Nice paintjob."

Starscream glowered. "That Autobot is not a fool," he snarled. "He knows the satellites are watching. He knows the danger. Why show himself? Why risk capture?"

"Why assume that I care?" Dismissively Megatron turned his back. "What I do know is that he is alone, trapped, and *excessively* outnumbered. These are the things that matter; others don't. Perhaps when I have him chained up alongside his brother, I'll get around to asking him your questions, and since you care so much, I'll even tell you his answers. Would that make you happy, Starscream?"

"You know what would make me happy." Those wings stiffened, jutting at a slightly higher angle than usual. "Three slaves for your berth, Megatron? Our mighty leader is generous, no doubt... to

himself. And yet you insist the energon wells can't spare the one Autobot that I -"

"Lord Megatron, permission to speak," Soundwave interrupted, almost hastily. He disliked standing in the midst of Megatron and Starscream's crossfire at any time, but it was especially unpleasant when the subject of Skyfire came up.

"What is it, Soundwave?"

"Conclusion of active cycle drawing near, analysis of fresh surveillance required. Dismissal possible?"

Megatron waved a disinterested hand. "Yes, yes, you're free to go. I'll call for you again when I need you."

There was no indication that he was expected to return to High Command the next cycle, which left Soundwave relieved. He bowed and retreated down the steps, eager to collect Jazz and leave the room before things turned violent.

"I grow weary of you pestering me with this matter, Starscream." Megatron's voice dipped darker, skimming just over the warning zone. "You know the rules. The largest of the slaves stay on Earth, they are too difficult to handle -"

"He's never even carried a weapon!" Starscream shrieked. "He is just a scientist, peaceful and obedient, and if you would let me -"

"Come," Soundwave instructed Jazz, who was again curled up with the other slaves by the wall. The argument was getting louder, and carried down well to the ground level.

"Let you what, Starscream? Take what *you* want? Who is the leader and who is the soldier? You take what I give you and you will be grateful for it, or you'll learn to make do with nothing at all."

"Don't you dare threaten me! I am Supreme Air Commander of Cybertron, I deserve the best, and that pathetic little red bot *isn't it*."

Perceptor whimpered when Jazz tried to stand, and clutched at his arm a little more tightly. Jazz's vocalizer hummed a low, soothing sound and he gently pried off Perceptor's hand, squeezing it comfortingly. He was taking too long; Soundwave had to grasp Jazz's shoulder to pull him away.

"I'll show you what you deserve." An ugly crack of metal on metal signaled the end of Megatron's patience. Starscream stumbled back, hand on face, seething with quiet fury. At the same time, Jazz uttered a nearly inaudible whine of protest at being torn from his friend. Impatiently Soundwave dragged him away, and Jazz stumbled along reluctantly. Too late.

"Just a moment, Soundwave."

The tone was languid, Megatron idly rolling his hand to loosen the joints, but the words were an order. Obediently Soundwave stopped in his tracks. Blithely ignoring the hissing, sputtering Starscream, Megatron's optics zeroed in on Jazz. "Something is different. Didn't I give that one to Skywarp?"

Soundwave resisted the brief temptation to step between them, blocking Jazz from Megatron's view. "Engaged Skywarp in trabacc game," he explained. "Jazz, prize won."

"Trabacc game," Megatron echoed in disbelief, descending one step at a time. "*You* played a card game.... and won a slave for your prize." Unexpectedly he threw back his head and bellowed with



laughter, triggering a chorus of snickers from around the room. Soundwave sensed Jazz tensing beside him.

"Oh, it's so delicious. The proud soldier, traded like a pile of chips across the table. This must be killing you, Autobot." His optics narrowed with malicious delight. "I know it would have killed Prime."

"Strange," Jazz said evenly, not missing a beat. "I thought it took a cowardly cannon shot, aimed at the fuel spill from which he was desperately trying to rescue his sparkmate, to kill Prime. Silly me."

Megatron's smile switched off like a light, and Soundwave didn't even have time to speak before he'd closed the distance between them. He hooked one large finger through Jazz's collar and yanked him forward, making Jazz stumble, and did not let go.

"Still with the quips, little slave? How quickly you've forgotten your lessons... and I do remember teaching you so many. Go ahead now, if you're so determined to run your mouth. Tell me what you really think of me." The collars were a snug fit to begin with. The strain against Jazz's neck must have been painful, but he made no sounds of distress. Somehow, he met Megatron's stare and did not drop his gaze.

"I imagine, Herr Megatron, that everyone in this room knows exactly what I think of you."

"Insolent glitch-mouse." Megatron flexed his grip on the collar, doing something that made Jazz wince and clench his fists. "Your precious leader is dead. So is much of your army, and whatever cause made any of you think you could take up arms and fight *me*. You live because I was generous enough to let you live, and you serve your Decepticon masters because you are grateful for my generosity. So show me your gratitude."

"If you're asking whether I prefer your touch to death..." Jazz's vocalizer had become strained with static; too much pressure was bearing on his neck. "Are you sure you want me to answer in front of your soldiers?"

Soundwave's acute hearing picked up on Starscream's smothered giggle, and he tried to subdue his own growing anxiety. A low, dangerous growl was welling up out of Megatron's throat.

"Last chance, slave." He made a show of glancing over at the corner, where a terrified Bluestreak watched them both. "Are you curious as to how loud I can make him scream tonight? I'll bring you home, and you can watch."

Something flashed across Jazz's visor, that Soundwave had never seen before. Jazz hadn't shown it for Skywarp, and he hadn't shown it for him, but he was showing it for Megatron: pure, sharp hatred. There was something almost eerie about the vicious glint, combined with the way he dropped his shoulders in submission.

"I am grateful," he whispered hoarsely, looking ready to choke on his own words. Megatron's lips curved into a cruel, satisfied smile, and Soundwave relaxed.

"That's more like it." At last he uncurled his finger from around the collar, only to nudge it against Jazz's lips. The struts in Jazz's back tightened, but he did not try to jerk his head away. Neither did he shutter his visor. Still meeting Megatron stare for stare, Jazz obediently opened his mouth and took it in. More snickers from their audience. Megatron's optics were glittering with sadistic glee, gliding his finger in and out of Jazz's mouth, and to Soundwave's surprise and no small dismay, Jazz willingly suckled and licked at it like a perfectly trained slave. It seemed forever until Megatron withdrew completely.

"Good little slave. It's all you Autobots will ever be."

Air exhaled from Jazz's vents and his fists unclenched themselves. If Soundwave had not learned to watch him so closely, he might have missed the tiny flicker of a smile that could best be described as sinister.

"E pur si muove, Herr Megatron. *E pur si muove.*"

Soundwave stopped relaxing. Megatron, who had been looking so pleased with himself, froze and shot Jazz a murderous glare. He had no idea what the words meant, as was painfully obvious to the rest of the room, and Megatron did not appreciate being made to look a fool anymore than Skywarp did. His response was swift and unhesitating. One backhand was hard enough to knock Jazz to the floor, almost spinning him completely around. He caught himself with his hands, gasping a little at the suddenness of it, but otherwise kept quiet. He also had the good sense to stay right where he was, even when Megatron dug a massive foot into Jazz's back.

"This one still has too much attitude, Soundwave. Crush it, or I will. I don't mind taking him back to my chambers for a few more 'lessons'."

Soundwave bowed. "Understood, Lord Megatron."

"Good." He dug his weight a little more deeply into Jazz before removing his foot, allowing Jazz to scramble away. "Dismissed."

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## on galileo

The first thing Jazz did, when the doors closed behind them, was spit out a mouthful of fluid. Hands shaking, he dragged an arm across his lips and tried to remove the last of Megatron's taste. Rather more of him than his hands was shaking, actually, and for a moment Soundwave was concerned he would collapse right there in the hall.

He touched his shoulder, and Jazz flinched violently away. "Can we not play right now, Soundwave?" he whispered, the occasional crackle of static still lacing his voice. "M'not really in the mood."

Frustration kindled within Soundwave at Jazz's reaction. All his hard work, his petting and handfeeding, had just been undone in a matter of nanokliks. He would have to begin again. When he tried to grasp Jazz's chin for examination, Jazz shied away and had to be steered into a wall before Soundwave could hold him still.

"Damage sustained?"

"What do you care?" Jazz tried to look away; again Soundwave grasped his chin and forced his face up.

"Jazz, mine," he reminded his slave rather tersely, and brushed light fingertips over the harsh scrape on his cheek. Jazz winced slightly, visor shuttering. "Damage extensive? Internal?"

"Worried about me? How *disturbingly* sweet of you. Don't bother; Megatron's given me worse."

Soundwave elected not to ask for details. Instead he ran a quick scan, the same scan he used to study his little symbiotes after they trounced one another in a particularly violent scuffle. Jazz's internals came up clean; his newly salvaged self-repair could take care of the scraped dermal plating.

Jazz twitched when his fingers glided southward from his face, over the far more vulnerable exposed wires in his neck. Carefully Soundwave examined each of them, checking for any damage Megatron might have inflicted there under the collar. His touch was entirely clinical, without sensual intentions, but Jazz whimpered and pressed himself back against the wall.

"Remain still," Soundwave ordered impatiently. "No harm intended."

"You feel like him."

The words were a murmur, barely audible, but they surprised Soundwave out of his task. Jazz was holding himself rigidly still under Soundwave's fingertips.

"After he's touched me, after his vents breathe his hot air on me, *everything* feels like him. He would be so pleased to know it, I'm sure."

"Should not have provoked Lord Megatron," Soundwave reprimanded, still annoyed at Jazz's behavior. "Promise broken. Disrespect, unwise."

"So very sorry, Master." Jazz's visor flickered on again, dark and humorless smile playing at his lips.

"It seems that my lord Megatron brings out my naughty side. If I hold my chin up and make him angry for even a sparkbeat, then it's worth every disgusting finger he puts on me. Or in me, as the

case may be. Don't be jealous. I am playing a very different game with him."

"Jealousy, inaccurate," Soundwave informed him promptly and coldly. "Disappointment, accurate. Better behavior expected."

"And let Megatron think he's won?"

"Megatron has won."

Jazz's macabre attempt at a smile dropped at Soundwave's matter-of-fact response, all his struts sinking like metal framework on swampy earth. That's when Soundwave noticed his hands were still shaking. Just what was Jazz struggling to control? Fury, or fear?

"Yes," Jazz whispered. "I know. He is the king, and I am the slave. I know he won."

His vents let out a rather shaky gust of air. Suddenly Jazz seemed so small, and sad. Soundwave's irritation was eroding; it was impossible to be angry at such a pitiful sight. He moved to lightly caress Jazz's face, and stifled a sigh when Jazz flinched away.

"Come. Return home now; your rest, necessary."

"A world without Megatron, necessary," Jazz mumbled. Soundwave, as always, ignored him.

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By the time Soundwave had returned home, touching down neatly on his balcony before allowing Jazz to push himself free, he'd become concerned about Jazz's dark mood. He hadn't said a word since their conversation in the hall, passing by several Decepticons without comment, and didn't even protest when Soundwave scooped him up in his arms for the flight home. Now he shuffled inside and headed straight for his usual corner, not even caring that he still wore his chains.

"Thanks for the field trip, master. Never had so much fun. I'm just gonna curl up and- hey!" Jazz pulled away in startled reflex when Soundwave hauled him backward, but he held Jazz fast by one arm while he unlocked the chain cuffs.

"Come." Keeping a firm grasp on his slave, he tugged him into the washracks.

"Oh not this again. You said I could rest!"

"Bathe first. Exposure to outdoors necessitates cleaning. Hold still."

Jazz huffed in exasperation, but didn't seem interested in fighting back. Obediently he stood under the gushing streams of warm solvent while Soundwave glided the foam brush over his armor, spreading soap in long and languid circles. Every now and then Jazz twitched with discomfort when the brush skimmed along an edge, but he didn't try to push it away. When Soundwave instructed him to, he lifted his arms and turned around. Soundwave was relentless, scrubbing every last inch of that armor, cleaning off his slave any possible trace of whatever - or whomever - he'd touched while outside. After he'd finished soaping down Jazz's body, he turned him around again and set his attention on Jazz's face. He chose a soft sponge, an organic product imported from Earth, for the more sensitive plating and passed it gently over the damaged area. Jazz didn't like that and hissed with pain, trying to pull his head clear, but Soundwave was insistent. Thorough cleaning would make self-repair faster and more effective. Finally, he forced open Jazz's mouth and tilted his head

back, ensuring that a good mouthful of solvent splashed inside before releasing Jazz so he could spit it all back out.

Then he switched off the flow.

Jazz was busy trying to cough up the last of the liquid, but his systems sputtered a little extra when Soundwave turned off the wash.

"Aren't- aren't you going to make me clean you?"

"Negative. Come."

He did not pull Jazz along by force this time. Looking a shade confused, Jazz followed on his own, back out into the front room. Their new colony Earth had become a popular source for many exotic products, things Decepticons had developed a taste for while stationed there, particularly *his* Decepticons. This soft angora drying cloth of Ravage's, for example, which he now applied to Jazz's armor. Jazz flinched again, but not quite so much, at the light and airy material gliding across his armor. Soundwave dried him as thoroughly as he'd washed him, noting in passing that he could see his own reflection in the surface. Jazz probably didn't even need a polish... but it wouldn't hurt, either.

Jazz stiffened when Soundwave nudged him up to the couch, and had to be pushed down onto it.

"Why are you doing this, Soundwave? I thought you were angry."

"Slave will not question master."

He opened a tin of Frenzy's favorite wax, a botanical concoction from South America, and sat next to Jazz. His slave promptly scooted away, pushing himself into the corner of the couch, legs drawn up protectively. Soundwave pulled them away, and pressed the cloth against his chest, rubbing in smooth circles. Jazz grimaced and pressed himself deeper into the cushions.

"Stop," Jazz tried again. "You- you're the master, or didn't you get the memo? You're not supposed to be doing this to me, you're supposed to just hit me and throw me in the corner and forget about me."

"Soundwave, master. Jazz, mine. I will decide what to do with you."

Around and over each headlight he moved, occasionally refreshing the cloth with more wax. He could hear and feel the systems underneath his hands fluctuating, revving with Jazz's uncertainty and then quieting with his exhaustion. The day had been stressful for them both.

When he reached the seam around Jazz's left shoulder, he slipped his fingers inside and applied strong, smooth pressure to the inner cabling. Jazz stiffened with surprise, but he also couldn't quite smother a small moan deep within his vocalizer. Soundwave repeated the motion, and was rewarded with a louder moan. The massage was meant to be more soothing than seductive, and he could feel Jazz relaxing under the touch. Avoiding the neck, he swept around Jazz's collar edge and did the same for his right shoulder.

The rumbling of Jazz's motors subsided into a low hum, and his vents drooped to narrow slits.

"H-how are you doing this?"

"Practice."

Indeed, Soundwave had performed this same task for his symbiotes thousands of times. He swept

his polishing cloth down the length of Jazz's arm, and paused there to massage the joints in his wrists. This time Jazz didn't even try to hold back a moan.

"Okay, stop, I'll talk!" Vaguely Jazz tried to tug his hand away; effortlessly Soundwave held on. "I give, I give. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

A joke; his mood was improving. Pleased with himself, Soundwave resisted asking Jazz whether his touch felt like Megatron now, and just moved on to give his other arm the same treatment. Jazz was no longer pushing himself back from Soundwave. Visor half-shuttered, he simply rested there quietly while Soundwave rubbed therapeutic strokes into the wires of his joints.

After a while, Soundwave returned to Jazz's chest. He polished down to the waist before skipping completely over the erogenous hip joints, for he was not interested in frightening Jazz just now.

Instead he concentrated on polishing his legs, edging backward and drawing Jazz's legs out straight as he did so. Jazz crooned softly under his systems' hum when he massaged the wires of his knee joints, light in his visor dimming still further, and a satisfied Soundwave glided the polishing cloth down his calves to the last joints. When he slipped his thumb inside Jazz's ankle joint, however, something different happened. White light flaring across his visor, Jazz yelped and sat up straight.

"Ah! Not there, not there!"

Surprised, Soundwave tilted his head to one side and studied Jazz. "Explain."

"Does it really matter?" He tried to pull his pede out of Soundwave's grasp, unsuccessfully. "Ugh, fine. If you must know, I might - perhaps - be just a little bit ticklish in those joints."

Ticklish? That was interesting information. Soundwave drew his thumb lightly up and down a sensory wire and Jazz bucked helplessly against the cushions, a short bark of laughter escaping before he could clamp his mouth shut. "S-stop, please!"

The dark melancholy had evaporated like smoke. Jazz wasn't just smiling but he was *laughing*, a bright and musical sound in the quiet loft. Soundwave relished it. Mercilessly he attacked Jazz's ankle and Jazz writhed helplessly against the cushions, alternately begging Soundwave to stop and gasping for the air that his intakes could not draw in quickly enough.

At last, Soundwave withdrew. While Jazz still struggled to normalize his temperature, Soundwave crawled back up along his body, taking care not to smother the already overheated little bot. Light flickered wanly across the visor before focusing on Soundwave's face just over his.

"You're despicable," he wheezed. "And a total failure. What kind of Decepticon tickles his prisoner? Pathetic."

"Jazz, mine." He traced a fingertip along Jazz's jawline, experiencing no small amount of smug satisfaction when Jazz did not flinch. "Mine to play with. So we play."

"There is something undeniably sick about that." That meager light extinguished itself, and Soundwave heard the overaccelerated engines drop a few notches. He'd be slipping into recharge any moment now. "But I can't be bothered to get angry about it. Just let me take a nap in peace, would you?"

"Request granted."

A final full gust of air escaped his vents in something like a sigh, before Jazz's internals had cooled enough to let them fall shut again. Within two clicks, he was well and truly deep in recharge.

Soundwave settled himself on top of him, warm and comfortable, and for the first time all day, he

was content.

---

He was still on the couch when the twins returned a short while later. Jazz's pedes rested in his lap and Soundwave idly rubbed them, enjoying the chance to do so while Jazz was asleep and couldn't squirm away. He was savoring the peace and quiet, which of course Rumble and Frenzy promptly ruined.

"Hey boss!"

"We're home!"

"What's up?"

"Recovering from your big trip out into the world?"

"Lower voices," Soundwave ordered, reluctant to move from his place.

"Huh?"

"Why?"

With simultaneous grunts of effort, the pair jumped up high enough to sling themselves over the arm of the couch, grinning merrily until they caught sight of Jazz.

"Ohhh."

"How cute. Soundwave put the Autobot down for a nap."

"We sure wouldn't want to wake him, would we, Rumble?"

"No we would not, Frenzy. That would be awful."

"Terrible."

"Don't," Soundwave said crisply. "Rest, necessary. Orn, difficult, stressful."

"...yeah," Rumble drawled, his optics on Soundwave's hand still rubbing at one of Jazz's pedes. "I'm sure he wore himself right out, tossing around all those insults. Not like you had to take him, ya know."

"Activity, preferable for health."

"Tell that to the dent in his face."

"Whoa, harsh." Frenzy tipped half over the couch arm, examining Jazz's face curiously. "What'd I miss, anyway?"

"He totally told Megatron off," Rumble answered gleefully. "It was kinda awesome, in a get-yourself-slugged sort of way. Jazz does it better than Starscream. Except I didn't get some of it. What was that word he kept calling Megatron, anyway? Hair?"

"Herr," Soundwave corrected. "Earthling form of address; language, German. Historical

implications, numerous."

"Another Earth language?" Frenzy snorted contemptuously.

"Planet's got too slagging many of 'em," Rumble complained. "Who would ever bother to download 'em all? Except you, of course. And Jazz, I guess. What was that other gobbledygook?"

"Italian. Translation..." Soundwave hesitated. "And yet it moves."

"Huh?" they chanted together, right on cue. Twin baffled looks went from Jazz back to him.

"Yet what moves?"

"And moves where?"

"Meaning, unclear," Soundwave admitted.

"It doesn't even make sense," Rumble grumped. "Look, Soundwave, we didn't want to tell you this -" Soundwave strongly doubted that. "- but we think your new toy is a little glitched in the head. He says all this weird stuff, and he smiles, and makes jokes, and it's all wrong! The other slaves aren't like that. They're depressed. They *should* be depressed. And he's not."

Soundwave's hands stopped moving, and he looked straight at Rumble. "Query: you want Jazz to be depressed?"

Rumble realized he'd just said something rather stupid, and Soundwave could sense his frantic mental backpedaling. "Uhh... well, no, of course I don't. I mean- we don't. It's just, you know, not what you'd expect from someone in his place. So why is he like that?"

Soundwave thought of Jazz shaking in the hallway, after the encounter with Megatron, so small and fragile it was like he'd break into a thousand pieces. How many times, he wondered, had he come close to completely shattering?

"Possible answer: Autobot not like that. Jazz, skilled pretender. Perhaps more so than most can even guess."

---

It was three cycles after his visit to Central Command that Soundwave concluded Ravage had become a problem. By now, both the elder and younger twins had accepted his orders to return and recharge inside him. None of the four were any happier about Jazz's presence in the loft, but they were learning to cope with - or ignore - the new arrival. Only Ravage, the oldest, the most loyal, and the most self-destructively stubborn of his team, had not obeyed. Not only had he not come seeking recharge with Soundwave, he hadn't even come home. In the past orn, he had not so much as returned to upload surveillance. The program designed to sync with Ravage had begun to flash warning messages, which triggered emotional subroutines of distress and anxiety. Soundwave struggled to override them, periodically checking Ravage's location via cameras and assuring himself that he was healthy and safe, but the programming of a carrier model ran deep. The strain of separation darkened his mood, which only echoed back to Ravage and all his other symbiotes besides, multiplying the problem fivefold.

Enough, Soundwave decided, was enough. At the conclusion of his morning duties, after properly sorting through the nocturnal surveillance data and posting his report to Megatron, he turned off his console and left the work room. Jazz looked up expectantly.



"No hax today," he announced, before Jazz could speak a word. "Fetch chains."

Blue light lit up within the visor. "We're going to HQ again?"

"Negative, small errand only. No Autobots."

"Oh. In that case, I'm not interested." Jazz slumped back down on the floor and returned to pecking at his datapad. "You can go without me."

"Order given."

"Order being ignored."

Soundwave suppressed a surge of exasperation and crossed the room in three long steps, hauling Jazz to his feet by one arm. Jazz didn't fight it, not at all surprised by Soundwave's reaction, but he still rolled an annoyed sound through his vocalizer.

"Order given," Soundwave repeated coldly. "Fetch chains."

"You were ready enough to leave me behind last time! Why do I have to come now? I don't actually enjoy being dragged around Iacon on a leash, you know."

He tried to push himself clear of Soundwave; Soundwave grasped his chin and tilted it up, almost far enough to put a painful strain on Jazz's neck cables but not quite.

"Your presence desired. Your observation, educational. You will come. Fetch chains."

He released Jazz with an abrupt twist that nearly cost Jazz his balance. He quickly sidled away, watching Soundwave warily, finally picking up on his master's bad mood. "Is it something I said? Because, you know, I need to keep track of whatever it is that can make you this mad, and say it again sometime."

Impatiently Soundwave snapped his fingers and pointed. Looking some mixture of annoyed, frustrated, and curious, Jazz gave up on needling him and collected his chains. Things between them had been hovering at some new and uneasy level since their session on the couch. Soundwave might have been able to coax Jazz out his misery with his hands, that day, but after waking up Jazz didn't seem any more inclined toward his touch than before. If anything, he held himself even more aloof, perhaps quietly mortified that he'd been tickled into submission by a Decepticon. As if to compensate, he didn't let a breem go by without tossing out some light insult, all of which Soundwave steadfastly ignored. The situation was not helping his mood, and when Jazz returned with his manacles, he slapped them on with a shade more force than was necessary. Without a word, he tugged Jazz forward and started walking.

Cybertron was not completely repaired. Sometimes it was easy to forget that, traveling the busy streets of Iacon, watching the swirl of civilians beneath him, lights glittering along the neat and orderly lines of a new power grid. But turn aside from the central avenues, and those lines became sparser, or stopped altogether. The shadowy blocks between them were the decayed and forgotten ruins of yesterday's Cybertron: half-destroyed buildings pockmarked with sniper shots, piles of rubble, all of it liberally coated in ash and soot. The shadows went deep, and they were silent. But Soundwave knew Ravage was lurking here. He could feel him, a roving blot of self-righteous *sulk* that bared its fangs at every attempted mental connection.

*"Come,"* Soundwave commanded, standing immobile amidst the debris. *"Your presence known; I will find you. Come now."*

A hostile snarl across the link was his only response, and the noisy tangle of angry cassetton started to fade. Ravage was on the move, trying to run away.

*"Escape futile. Suggestion, do not make it worse by trying."*

Mentally, Ravage hissed something snide, presence sifting away like the ash blowing around Soundwave's pedes. Promptly Soundwave followed at a brisk clip, long strides devouring the distance. One program tagged to monitor Jazz noted that his slave had to scurry to keep up, but was moving with his usual silent grace. He hadn't opened his mouth since they left the last powered avenue, taking a cue from Soundwave to keep silent in spite of his clearly visible curiosity.

Ravage tried to trick him, breaking sharply to the left after a hard sprint to the north, but Soundwave's grip on their link was unbreakable. Swiftly he slipped around the husk of some bombed building, blocking Ravage's intended route, and was rewarded with a brief flash of panic before Ravage's renewed determination masked it. He still hadn't laid eyes on the obstinate little creature, but his audios picked out a faint, brief scrabble of claws against metal.

*"Soundwave, master. Ravage, mine. Come now."*

A feline growl rolled into his mind, rich with spiteful repudiation and pretended independence. Cautiously, Soundwave sidled closer to the shelled remains of an old factory. Much of its walls and all its roof were stripped away, baring it to the open sky, but the old assembly drones and belts remained. Ravage was here, the nearness of his small spark crying out to Soundwave's, but Ravage himself still refused to come forth. Soundwave turned a slow circle, scanning the darkness, audios alert for any noise. Ravage, though, was simply too good at infiltration and espionage to be caught so easily. One with the shadows, he slipped around Soundwave, all his thoughts coiling in preparation.

Soundwave assumed it was another bolt to escape, until he finished his turn and saw Jazz again, watching him nervously and standing far too close to a deep pocket of darkness. He did not even have the chance to verbalize a warning before Ravage leapt, splitting the silence with a hunter's screech. Jazz yelped and hit the dirt without a nanoklik to spare, just missing Ravage's deadly sharp claws, then pushed himself to roll aside before Ravage could pounce again and pin him. His reflexes were fast, but he didn't have a hope of defending himself in his chains. When Ravage gathered himself to attack again, Soundwave scooped him up and tossed him lightly across the factory floor, putting a safer distance between his two possessions. Jazz, vents wheezing, scrambled into a wary crouch while Ravage paced back and forth, now growling aloud.

*"Unacceptable,"* Soundwave snapped, moving between them. *"Stop, now. Return."*

Ravage hissed, red glow of his optics still locked on Jazz. Some blend of *outsider/prey/attack*

flowed into Soundwave's mind, and he spread his arms a little wider, moving in on his bristling casseticon.

*"Soundwave, master. Ravage, mine. Return."*

Struts rippled under Ravage's armor plates and claws flexed against the ground, betraying his eagerness to sink them into Jazz. *Kill/destroy/eliminate!*

*"Negative,"* Soundwave countered. *"Autobot mine. Accept."*

Refusal echoed wildly in the link between them.

*"Order given. Ravage, mine. Obey."*

A haughty dismissal was all Ravage spared him before he sprang for another attack on Jazz. This time Soundwave was prepared, and blocked him sharply with a swipe of the arm. Ravage tumbled backward heels over head, and screeched at the indignity. Now hurt and jealousy welled up in the connection, but Soundwave did not relent.

*"Autobot irrelevant. Obey master, obey orders. Ravage mine; submission inevitable."*

An ancient streak of rebelliousness surfaced just then, and Ravage tried to startle him with a surprise attack. Unhesitatingly Soundwave slammed him into the ground and pinned him there, a massive hand clamped around Ravage's muzzle. Soundwave abandoned words at that point and flooded his symbiote with thousands of images and sounds, all of them streaming from archived memory files.

*Unclaimed symbiote/lost/unfueled/alone/vulnerable/found/fed/trying to run/found/trying to fight/conquered/fed/trying to run/found/trying to resist/tamed/trying to disobey/trained/given home/shelter/security/obedience given/loyalty given/resistance futile/soundwave home/soundwave master/soundwave everything.*

Ravage had stopped fighting. Under the rapid fire assault of data he trembled and cowered, growl now more of a pleading whine. Soundwave relaxed his grip, but did not let go just yet.

*"Soundwave master. Ravage mine."*

This time there was no resistance, no denial. That battle had been fought long ago. Ravage whined again, supplicatingly, and Soundwave let go of his face that he might stroke a gentle hand along his jaw.

*"Autobot, not a threat. Accept."*

*Outsider/death/sorrow/darkness* was the confused response, thick and muddy with worry.

Soundwave was not surprised, even if it did not excuse Ravage's attack. They were all worried for him, and Ravage most of all.

*"Concern unnecessary,"* he assured his symbiote. *"Outcome, different. Autobot not a threat."*

Ravage was not one to change his mind easily, but he was also exhausted. Everything in his body was screaming at him to fold up and recharge inside his carrier, craving the synchronization he needed, and Ravage could resist it no more. Soundwave felt his argument wobble, and then topple over with reluctant submission. If Soundwave said it would be different, then it would be different. Ravage would obey, and accept.

Soundwave opened his chest, and the weary Ravage folded up and tucked himself inside. Abruptly

aware of his own dropping energy levels, Soundwave expelled hot air through his vents and stood. Jazz was sitting pressed back against the nearest wall, visor fixed on Soundwave with a kind of horrified fascination, hands shaking as they clenched shut around his chains.

"Ravage now subdued. Lesson, taken?"

"Go to hell, Soundwave," Jazz whispered. "I'm not one of your cassettes."

"What you are," Soundwave replied, careful to pronounce every word, "is mine."

---

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## on the beat

*"Donc, qu'est-ce que c'est?"*

It was the first Jazz had spoken in several joors. For most of the cycle he'd been uncharacteristically, if unsurprisingly, quiet, since Soundwave's... demonstration. They had returned from the unrepaired sectors in a rather frigid silence. But now the day was close to its end, and Ravage out of his chest, if not exactly out of recharge. Draped like liquid feline across his lap, Ravage was too deep under to even twitch an audio at the sound of Jazz's voice. His low, steady purr vibrated against Soundwave's armor. Soundwave looked up at Jazz, tucked away in his corner, one hand still polishing Ravage in smooth, gentle circles.

*"So, what is it?"*

Jazz was sprawled out on his front, idling a stylus in one hand, but he wasn't paying attention to his puzzles. He was studying Soundwave instead, Soundwave and the little mechs piled up on him. *"Is it jealousy?"* he continued, sticking to French. *"Is that why your pet demon cat tried to shred me to ribbons this morning? Are they afraid I'll take you away from them? Because as far as I'm concerned, they can keep you."*

"What's he saying?" Frenzy mumbled, face mostly obscured thanks to wedging himself between Soundwave and Ravage.

"Who cares?" Rumble added, from atop his brother. "Tell 'im to shut up, Soundwave."

The twins had picked up an echo of his own exhaustion this orn, and they also felt the contented nurturing washing back and forth between himself and Ravage. Nothing if not self-indulgent, they'd practically thrown themselves at their master the nanoklick they returned home, and now all they wanted was to curl up against him and bask in that warmth. Talking of any kind, particularly on Jazz's part, was not welcome.

"Negative," Soundwave finally answered. "Assessment incorrect. Distrust, more accurate."

*"Because I am so very much a threat to you? I wish. What do they know that I don't?"*

Soundwave felt somewhat caught out by his own admission, an unusual circumstance. He picked his words carefully. "Distrust, without reason. Misplaced."

*"Distrust accurate, but inaccurate?"* Jazz chuckled. *"So, you're saying they're wrong about their own feelings. Funny how Ravage seemed very sure."*

"Misplaced," Soundwave repeated firmly.

*"I don't believe you."* Something in that visor gleamed with rapt interest. *"But I also don't think you're lying. Une mystère."*

He lowered his chin to rest on his folded arms, gaze fixed on his master, still studying him, still trying to *solve* him like the forgotten puzzles on the floor, and Soundwave should not have been so disconcerted to know it. He returned his attention to Ravage's armor, already polished to the sheen of obsidian.

*"Welcome to the house of Soundwave," Jazz murmured. "He'll pound you into the ground for defiance, but always washes you off and gives you a good buffing afterwards. The best master any mech could ask for."*

"Soundwaaave," whined his two little mechs in unison.

"Jazz, quiet."

*"Oui, maître." Jazz rolled up onto his side, still absorbed in the sight on the couch. "I can see this is important; I wouldn't want to interrupt. Better them than me, anyway."*

"Your turn, coming soon."

A tiny sigh. *"I am warned,"* Jazz said softly, and finished rolling over onto his back, visor flickering off.

You are guaranteed, Soundwave thought, and rested a large hand on Ravage's head. After all, in this household, resistance never made it very far.

---

*Transmission signal sent.*

*Target frequency located.*

*Constructicon, Hook successfully hailed.*

*Transmission signal accepted.*

"Soundwave, sir. What, uh, can I do for you?"

"Modified energon nearing depletion."

"The wha... those crystallized treats for the Autobot, you mean? What about it?"

"Replenishment required."

"I doubt he needs any more of it. His fuel intakes have had more than enough time to adjust by now, I'm sure he can take liquid energon by the cube like any other mech."

"Replenishment required."

"Look, Soundwave, I can take a look at him if you like, but I saw this hundreds of times in the war. His systems are bound to be back in line, so long as you kept to the schedule I gave you."

"Orders followed exactly. But parameter irrelevant; replenishment required. *Now.*"

"Uh, yes sir. I'll comm Mixmaster directly, and we'll have a fresh batch prepped by the end of the active cycle. So you, uh, just want him to keep fueling this way? These things aren't cheap, you know. Any particular reason?"

"Explanation, unnecessary."

"None of my business, right. Well, how about something that is more my business? How's his health in general? Are his energy levels back up? Recharging through the night yet?"

"Affirmative. Autobot energy reading, standard. Recharge duration, standard. Reflexes, proven."

"How you know that last one, I probably don't want to know, but now that you've mentioned it, I want to talk about physical activity. Is he getting any exercise? Outside the berth, that is?"

"Negative. Why?"

"You're not exactly famous for being the mech-about-town, Soundwave. I know you're happy to hole up in your tower and let your little critters do the roaming for you, but if you want to keep your new toy in good condition, you're gonna have to give him more than the twenty steps it takes to cross your loft. Jazz is a vehicle model, they like to move - they *need* to move, or they get all sulky and rebellious. Then they get stiff and need joint repair. Learned that the hard way with my own bot. So if Jazz's energy levels are back to normal, then he's gonna need the exercise to match. At least take him with you when you run errands."

"Cassetticons entrusted with all errands."

"Well just take him on a *walk*, then, if you've got nothing to do, I don't care. But I'm telling you, he needs it. You're the one that wanted him in good health. You don't want a repeat of what happened last time, do you?"

"... Negative."

"So consider it medic's orders. Every cycle, if you can."

"Instructions, understood. Further information necessary?"

"No, sir."

"Energon delivery expected tonight. Transferring credits now. Soundwave out."

"Hook ou-"

*Transmission terminated.*

---

It was with some small feeling of awkwardness that Soundwave stood in the doorway and looked at Jazz, Hook's orders logged firmly into his processor. Jazz looked right back at him, waiting for him to move to the table, the signal that his master was ready to engage him in their ongoing hax game.

Instead, Soundwave stayed where he was. "Hax, later. Now, fetch chains."

"Another trip out into the world? And so soon. If you're not careful, you'll damage your reputation of total reclusion from society. Some mechs might actually start to believe you exist." Languidly Jazz stretched and rolled over onto his back, arching just enough to look at Soundwave upside down.

"So do I have another date with Ravage's claws? Or is it Megatron's tender mercies at HQ to which I can look forward?"

"Neither. Objective... walk."

The answer sounded as awkward as he felt. Jazz stared at him.

"Walk."

"Affirmative."

"You... want to go... on a walk."

"Want, inaccurate. Your exercise, necessary. Fetch chains."

"Oh, so this is for *me*. Well, don't I feel lucky." Jazz rolled over again, back onto his front, and propped his chin in one hand. "Funny how you never cared so much about my health for all those vorns you've spent taking potshots at me on the battlefield."

"Circumstances altered. Now, Jazz mine."

Jazz made a face. "I liked it better when you were shooting at me."

"Stop argument. Fetch chains."

"Yes, Master Soundwave. I live only to please you, Master Soundwave."

Jazz uncurled up off the floor with his own unique brand of grace, and collected his chains.

Soundwave latched them on as usual, still feeling strangely out of sorts with this new task assigned to him. The feeling only got worse when they exited the building at street level. Jazz made no move to start walking, watching him expectantly, because of course he was waiting on his master to choose a direction.

Soundwave was, momentarily, lost. He had never, in all his life, taken a 'walk'. Always he had a specific destination in mind, a mission to accomplish, an objective to fulfill. His little cassettes, sparked with the basic programming to wander, explore, and record, would have been better suited to this assignment. Now what?

Mentally Soundwave scrambled, until he thought to consult his tactical programming. From Aggrenet he downloaded a current map of Iacon, and highlighted the accessible avenues, then sorted through route possibilities until he'd arranged a contiguous path that traced a wide oval through the city and would lead them right back to his front door. Calculating Jazz's average walking speed, it would take them slightly less than one joor. Satisfied, Soundwave turned in that direction and started walking.

Jazz fell in behind him with little more than a soft clink of the chains. Then even that vanished, and for the next ten steps he moved so silently that Soundwave could not even be sure Jazz was still there. Logically, Soundwave knew he must be, but the silence was still unsettling. It seemed quite pointless to take this walk for Jazz's benefit if he could not even register his presence.

Soundwave stopped, and partly turned.

"Walk beside."

"Beg pardon?"

"Walk here." Soundwave clapped a large hand on Jazz's shoulder and steered him forward, planting him firmly to Soundwave's left.

"Uh, why?"



"Because order given." Soundwave started walking again but Jazz didn't, so he had to pause and nudge him forward. Jazz scowled and tried to duck out from under his hand, but Soundwave wouldn't have to steer him if he'd walk when and where he was supposed to. Impatiently Soundwave clasped a strong grip just above Jazz's elbow and kept walking, almost causing Jazz to stumble.

"Alright, alright, I'll walk beside you! Let go, already."

Agreeably Soundwave did as he asked, but kept a sharp optic out for any attempt on Jazz's part to sidle away or drop back. This arrangement was preferable; he could see Jazz now and hear the low hum of his systems. This 'walk' was more enjoyable with a companion than an invisible servant.

Jazz huffed a couple times in annoyance, but didn't argue anymore. Together they traveled down the street, civilians scattering out of Soundwave's path.

"Soundwave, six."

This time it was Jazz's turn to stop short. "What was that?"

"Soundwave," he repeated smugly, "six."

"Uh, no. Let's get two things straight: one, that was your fifth point. *Fifth*. You did not score anything the night we started playing hax, that was my point. Two, you do not give the points, I give the points. It's my game."

"Game, ours," Soundwave corrected. "My victory, inevitable."

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" Jazz started moving again, walking backwards to keep his visor locked on Soundwave's. "But just because you're a sharper tack than that crosswired Seeker of mine does not mean you're going to win. Nobody beats me at my own game."

Until now, thought Soundwave, but in his peripheral vision he glimpsed the neutrals staring. The two of them must make an odd spectacle like this, Jazz walking backward and arguing with his master.

"We will see," was all he said.

Jazz probably didn't think for a second that Soundwave was actually backing down, but he grunted softly in the back of his vocalizer and turned around again. A sharp look on Soundwave's part sent the nosy neutrals back to their business.

"Ooh, shiny."

When Soundwave turned back, he discovered Jazz admiring the wares of one of the lowly street vendors. Those neutrals who didn't have the claws to carve out a real establishment for themselves, in the solar cycles since the war, had learned to make do with small carts that lined the walks. This one was one of the many selling Earth cloths, which had become so popular they'd all but completely replaced the synthetic mesh Cybertronians once used. As he watched, Jazz fondled one of the hanging samples, and rubbed his dermal plating against its soft fleecy texture.

"I can almost smell Earth on it," he sighed wistfully. "New Zealand, I think."

"Hands off, slave!" barked the neutral. "My cloths are for the mecha that can buy them. Get lost."

Jazz started to step back, only for Soundwave to drop a hand on his shoulder to hold him in place.

The vendor looked up and blanched a little when he saw a massive Decepticon staring back.

"Product, now mine. Name price."

"Hu-hun- fifty credits," he finally stammered. "Sir."

Soundwave produced a data chip, then deliberately dropped it on the ground at his pedes. "Trade concluded."

Without wasting another glance on the oilblot, who'd promptly dropped to his knees to frantically hunt down his payment, Soundwave folded the cloth and stored it in his subspace.

"That was completely unnecessary," Jazz said wryly, when Soundwave nudged him to start walking again.

"Assessment incorrect. Your own drying cloth needed. Cassetticons, possessive and unwilling to share."

"I meant the Cold Stare of Death. If you wanted to scare him silly and rob him of his profit, all you had to do was point your cannon at him and get it over with."

"Behavior, unacceptable."

"Well aren't you the knight in not-so-shiny armor?" Jazz remarked, not a little bitterly. "You know, I joined the Autobots to protect mechs like him from mechs like you. Now a mech like you is protecting me from a mech like him. I really don't know how to feel about that, but you sure as pit aren't getting a point for it, so sorry if you were hoping for one."

"Direction, incorrect."

"What?"

Jazz had already started to wander on to the next stall, but this line of vendors led away from Soundwave's designated route strategy. "Direction, incorrect. Return to main avenue."

"It's a walk, Soundwave." He was favored with a particularly condescending grin and tilt of Jazz's head. "Do you not understand how it works? It doesn't matter where you go. It matters what you see."

He continued on, without waiting for any kind of approval on Soundwave's part. After a nanoklik of hesitation, Soundwave rearranged a new route that would still lead them on a walk of satisfactory length, and followed. Jazz seemed interested, and since this walk was for his benefit, Soundwave was willing to overlook his impertinence. He kept just close enough to ensure that no more vendors treated his property with disrespect.

The so-called market was not a complete waste of time, in any case. In addition to cloth, there were Earth-imported tins of wax, and canisters of organic soap guaranteed to leave a streak-free shiny finish. Soundwave purchased that too, sparing the twins the trouble of buying some later. Other stalls sold frivolous data cards, packed with vids and music and games. When Soundwave caught Jazz looking at a set of advanced puzzles, he quickly bought that too. Another was hawking crystallized fragments of energon rolled in balls of Earth's oil, a sticky treat that Rumble and Frenzy adored. Soundwave contemplated buying one for Jazz, but they were unhealthy and left traces of gunk in the fuel system. Some other time, perhaps. This mild collection of goods for sale was nothing compared to the glories of Golden Age Cybertron, when shops and stalls covered huge swathes of the planet, but it was useful all the same.

Some kind of motion in the corner of his visor prompted Soundwave to glance at Jazz again, but he wasn't doing anything unusual. Only dawdling past a stall dedicated to music data cards, one of which the vendor was blasting at top volume. Soundwave watched Jazz carefully. The refrain cycled past, climaxing into a particular musical phrase, and this time Soundwave saw it. *Tap, tap, tap* went Jazz's pede against the ground, and then *tap-skip-tap* when he moved into some kind of syncopated dance step. Then the rhythm changed and it was over as quickly as it had begun, Jazz moving on as if nothing happened.

"Stop."

"Now what? Walking on the wrong side of the street from your designated route?"

"What was that?"

"What was wha~at?" Jazz asked playfully, all innocence in his smile.

"That movement. Step, unusual."

"That old thing? Just a habit, I guess. The beat was callin' to me."

"You like music." It wasn't a question, but an abruptly retrieved memory file. How many times had he seen Jazz racing across the surface of the planet, both this one and Earth, blaring his obnoxious tunes at audio-crushing levels? He wondered if Jazz still had access to those files. The avalanche-inducing amplifiers had been removed, that he knew for certain, as well as the dazzling light show that could overload and blind a mech's optical relay. But he probably still had the music itself.

"Play it, still?"

"My own music, you mean? Only when I'm happy." Jazz glanced at the thumping stall again, a momentary sadness dimming his visor. "So, not for a long time."

"Permission to play aloud in loft, given."

"So noted."

He still looked sad. Soundwave reached up with the thought of stroking Jazz along the jawline, a reflexive action meant to soothe and reassure. But Jazz slipped back out of reach, with a move so seamlessly in time with the music that it seemed quite natural. *Tap-skip-tap*, again, followed by a gracefully tight spin. The vendor whistled with appreciation, and Jazz plucked up his grin again.

"But what do I need to play music for, when we've got a righteous beat here and now? Gets the fuel pumping through your lines, don't it?"

"Negative," answered the mystified Soundwave. "Fuel pumps without aid of excessive audial stimulation."

Jazz almost faltered over his own pedes, and shot Soundwave an exasperated look. "Expression, Soundwave. All I meant was, don't you like it?"

"Negative," he repeated, but this time more secure in his understanding. "Like, dislike, inaccurate. Music, irrelevant."

Jazz flinched like he'd just slapped him in the face. "What?"

"Music quality, subjective and irrelevant. Inconsequential."

"Primus, you really mean that, don't you? Finest sound system on Cybertron and you don't even care about music. That is *so sad*." Jazz huffed and flicked him squarely in the center of his chest glass. "What a waste." Apparently done with dancing, he turned on his heels and started walking.

"That's why Blaster hated you, you know."

The words came unexpectedly, just when Soundwave thought the conversation was over. At the sound of the name, dropped so casually, he froze in his tracks.

"Explain."

Jazz was still walking, and apparently didn't notice how Soundwave had stopped short, or didn't care. Idly he kicked a tiny scrap of metal. "It's not because you're a Decepticon, and it's not because you're the walking embodiment of evil. Though you are both those things. He hated you because he loved music more than life itself, and to you, it meant nothing." He slowed, and turned, his expression a mixture of pity and disgust.

"You don't feel *anything*, when you hear music, you don't feel its beauty, its passion. To you it's just another 'noise', just some sound to be recorded and filed away. To Blaster, it was art. To you, it's a weapon. And how could he not hate that?"

Silence plumed between them, somehow thick and tense even with all the noise around them. Jazz was watching him, he had to say something, but for once in his long life Soundwave could not think what.

"Differences... many," he managed at last. "Autobot Blaster, very different."

"Ain't that the truth." Had he noticed? It was difficult to tell, in this ambiguous light. Something glinted in Jazz's visor, but then he turned and started walking again. "He was my friend. And you are not."

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on family

The small box of oiltreats were sitting on the floor, between the two video game controllers, when Rumble and Frenzy returned home that evening. Rumble spotted it first and let out a squawk of delight, one that was promptly echoed by his twin in that curious faster-than-light connection they shared. Rumble made a mad dash for the goodies, but Frenzy tackled him from behind and the two of them went rolling across the floor.

"All mine!"

"Not a chance, half-bit!"

"Try and stop me, scraplet." Rumble braced a pede against Frenzy and threw him off, twisting over and scrambling forward. He yelped when Frenzy threw his full weight on him and tried to get him in a headlock, then thrust his elbow back into Frenzy's mid-torso gap with savage accuracy.

"Ouch! That *hurt*, you fragger."

"Serves you right," Rumble panted, doggedly crawling across the floor while Frenzy tried to haul him backward. He swore colorfully when Frenzy managed to get a joint lock on his shoulder and wrench him over onto his side, echoed again by his brother when he managed to kick Frenzy right in the jaw. Alternately swearing, wailing, and laughing, the two of them tussled back and forth across the floor in a tangle of red and blue armor. In the middle of deciding where to move his next hax piece, Soundwave barely paid it any attention, except to note a promising uplift in the twins' general mood.

Jazz, on the other hand, was enthralled. Visor gleaming with avid interest, he propped his chin in both hands and absorbed himself in the contest. Not even most Decepticons were privy to his symbiotes' enthusiastic brawling; Jazz was probably the first Autobot to see it.

"Welcome to the Thunderdome," he murmured. "So who's gonna win?"

"Victor irrelevant. Behavior, expression of good mood." He didn't add that it had been a while since he'd seen it.

"Good mood?" Jazz repeated, watching Frenzy body slam Rumble rather viciously into the floor. "How adorable. Primus knows what they do to each other when they're angry."

"Collateral damage, extensive," Soundwave agreed.

Finally, the violence ran its course. Vents wheezing, still occasionally hiccuping with giggles, the two of them managed to drag themselves to the box and dig in for their prize.

"Mmm... sweet and sticky and marvelously bad for you," Rumble sighed, when Frenzy had popped one between his lips. He took his time rolling it around in his mouth, flopped over on his back so his systems could power down to normal levels.

"But therein lies the goodness," Frenzy added, taking time to lick his fingers clean. "And you always complain that we eat too much of 'em. What's the big occasion, boss?"

"No occasion necessary. Motivation, spontaneous."

"Oh. Huh."

Neither of them said thank you, nor did they have to. Soundwave could feel their gratitude flowing through the link, along with their surprise and delight, all of which he relished. Their enthusiastic reaction had been more than he hoped for.

"Wait a nano..." Rumble's optics flickered back online and he sat up, fixing Soundwave with a baffled stare. "You can't get these delivered! Did you - like, go *out* or something?"

"Affirmative."

Both jaws swung open, stunned. Soundwave pretended not to notice, still calmly evaluating his next move. First they stared at him, then at each other, and then, as one, turned their astonished gazes to Jazz. He just smiled under the scrutiny and tipped his head to the side.

"What's wrong, boys? Never heard of a coupla mechs takin' a walk?"

If they had not already been sprawled gracelessly across the floor, they would have probably fallen over. Amused, Soundwave made his selection and moved the hax piece.

"Rumble, Frenzy, prepare for data upload."

He stood and moved towards his console room, and the blankly silent twins followed. But they did not need to speak.

Soundwave could still feel their gratitude, and this time it was not for him.

---

Soundwave was still learning things about Jazz. For instance, now that Jazz's recharge schedule had normalized, he'd learned Jazz actually preferred to sleep late. Soundwave was the first to wake most days, and when he did, he would inevitably find Jazz curled up on the far side of the berth. It still profoundly irritated Soundwave that Jazz could wriggle out of his grasp like that, but if he tried to wrap Jazz in his arms and pull him back to his chest, Jazz would instantly wake up. Most mornings Soundwave just contented himself lying beside him, listening to the light hum of his recharging systems. Not until his first joorly feeding time was near did Soundwave shake Jazz's shoulder.

"Mmnf."

"Recharge complete. Wake now."

"Goway." Jazz tipped further over onto his side away from Soundwave, draping an arm over most of his face. "M'still sleeping."

"Refueling necessary."

"Which one of your buttons do I hit for ten more breems of recharge?"

Patiently Soundwave peeled away Jazz's arm, pulling him back to lie on his back. Visor firmly offline, Jazz scowled in his general direction.

"Open mouth."

"If you would just let me feed myself, we wouldn't have to go through this every morning."

"Argument, futile. Open mouth."

Jazz's engine rumbled with irritation, but at last he opened his mouth. Soundwave inserted the energon treat neatly between his lips, and stroked light fingertips across his cheek while Jazz swallowed.

"Gonna let me go back to sleep now?"

"Question, asked every morning. Answer, always -"

"Negative," Jazz sighed.

"Affirmative." Amused, Soundwave edged off the berth and stood. A scrabble of claws against metal, as well as the brush of nearness within his own spark, signaled the return of his aerial cassettes. He left Jazz on the berth - they both knew he'd return and drag Jazz off it if he didn't do it himself within a breem - and entered the front room. Laserbeak hopped onto his shoulder and Buzzsaw his wrist, as per usual, chirping their greetings. Affectionately Soundwave scratched Buzzsaw under the beak, then moved across the room to the fuel dispenser. He had a surprise in store for his aerials this morning; Rumble and Frenzy's oiltreats were not all he'd purchased on Jazz's walk. Both Buzzsaw and Laserbeak had an affinity for their energon in crystallized form, crushed into tiny fragments. They were perfectly capable of drinking their fuel as a liquid, a necessity for most of the war, but with their sharp beaks they enjoyed the crunchy texture of crystals. Now he was unlacing two packets of them, and both twins hopped and twittered with delighted surprise. They were not nearly so violent about it as their older brothers, but they did peck and nip at his wires, then chased each other around the room once or twice before settling back down to eat.

When it came to solid fuel, Laserbeak liked to eat out her master's hand. They both did, actually, but Buzzsaw only ever did when he was sick and didn't have to pretend to be tough. His twin had no such compunctions. After Soundwave poured a pile of crystallized feed on the windowsill for Buzzsaw, he emptied the other packet into his own palm and held himself quite still. Using his other arm as a perch, Laserbeak settled herself and began to devour her breakfast.

"I knew it."

Soundwave looked up. Jazz was leaning against the doorway, watching the scene with something like bemused resignation. "I knew I wasn't the first. You train everybody here to eat out of that hand, don't you? Give them fuel and they'll follow you anywhere, right, master?"

"Reasons vary. Purpose for Jazz: subjugation. Purpose for Laserbeak: enjoyment. This method, her preference."

Jazz winced and looked away, out the window. "I wonder if she can even tell the difference."

Soundwave glanced at the symbiote balanced on his wrist, happily pecking away at her fuel, then back at his slave. "Jazz, come."

"Your hands are a little full right now, aren't they?"

"Order given. Come."

Jazz looked wary, but he obeyed, closing the distance between them with diffident steps. When he was close enough, Soundwave reached for one of his hands, a motion that startled Laserbeak and forced her to take flight. Ignoring her squawk of protest, he closed his hand over Jazz's and pulled it forward. Jazz's intakes hitched sharply and he tensed as if he'd like to pull away, but he smothered the impulse. Quite gently, Soundwave turned over his hand and uncurled his fist, smoothing his

hand across Jazz's palm. Then he tipped the remainder of Laserbeak's feed onto the flattened surface.

"What are you doing?" Jazz asked anxiously, and this time he did try to back away. A sharp squeeze on his wrist kept him in place.

"Hush. Remain still."

Laserbeak had resettled herself on Soundwave's arm. Optics shuttering twice in rapid succession, she examined the new location of her breakfast and cocked her head to the left and right.

Uncertainly she shuffled her claws and twisted her neck that she might peer up at Soundwave.

He did not form any words, only gave a mental nudge to finish refueling. She said nothing either, but he could sense the flustered swirl of thoughts. On one wing, Jazz was an outsider, not trusted or wanted. On the other wing, she already knew about the walk. To tell any of his cassettes something was to tell all of them, and Rumble and Frenzy had wasted no time sharing the news with their brothers and sister. They all knew, and they all knew the reason. Again Laserbeak studied Jazz, standing so still with his vents held silent, and made up her mind. Delicately she dipped her head and snapped up a few crystals. Jazz jumped a little but held himself still, more out of his own resolve than Soundwave's grip. Laserbeak swallowed her fuel and dove back in for more, then again, at a relaxed, unhurried pace. Jazz eventually relaxed as she kept at it, his frame losing the tightly wound tension, and he started watching Laserbeak with more fascination than nervousness. He didn't even flinch when Laserbeak finished her meal, snapping each last tiny fragment off Jazz's palm with unerring precision.

Softly, so as not to startle either of them, Soundwave covered Jazz's hand in his and guided it to Laserbeak's head. There was a minor flash of apprehension on her part, but it was not enough to disturb her pleasant post-fueling satisfaction. Jazz's ventilations skipped a beat, but he didn't demur as Soundwave glided his open palm in slow strokes down Laserbeak's back. Soundwave knew all Laserbeak's favorite spots, and languidly he steered Jazz's hand down the plates between her wings, then underneath each wing joint, then back up to the head to scratch underneath her beak.

Soundwave relaxed his hold very gradually, so slowly that neither possession even seemed to notice he'd let go, until Jazz was stroking the under side of her beak all on his own. Never one to argue with a little pampering, Laserbeak stretched and luxuriated in the touch, optics half-shuttered with pleasure.

"Pretty," Jazz murmured. "You know, when she's not trying to peck your optics out on the battlefield. She's actually very... pretty."

Laserbeak trilled deep in her vocalizer with smug delight. Soundwave nodded. "Affirmative. Laserbeak, aesthetically appealing. All my possessions, aesthetically appealing."

One hand glided gently up the side of Jazz's arm, along his shoulder, and then lightly cupped his jawline. Jazz trembled only a little. Did he feel, even just a little, what Laserbeak felt under the hand of her master? Did he understand at all?

Then it happened, so fast and so subtle that Soundwave might have missed it, had his mind not been on that very question. Jazz tilted his head *into* Soundwave's touch. Just for a moment.

It was all the answer Soundwave needed.

---



It is the natural programming of a Cassetticon to watch, listen, and record. They are built to be the optics and audios of the carrier mech they will someday bond with; it is their deepest instinct to study the world around them. Should they stumble upon something that intrigues them, they will give it their unabashed attention. Some mechs unfamiliar with cassette culture call it being nosy. For a cassette, it's simply a compliment. What they don't like, they ignore. What they do like, they watch. And when they can't decide, Soundwave had long since learned, they pester it until they've figured it out.

The twins didn't waste time. It was only the second day of Soundwave and Jazz's new schedule, their second attempt at a walk, and this time Soundwave was careful to plot a route that took them nowhere near that music stall. If Jazz noticed that, he didn't say anything, and he walked alongside Soundwave like he was supposed to. Everything was going nicely to plan until Frenzy 'coincidentally' materialized out of the crowds.

"Hey boss!" he said brightly. "Fancy running into you here."

Jazz looked from Frenzy to Soundwave, affecting confusion. "Do we know this guy?"

"Frenzy, currently on duty."

"What, I can't take a ten-breem break? You're taking one." Pointedly he looked to Jazz and then back to Soundwave again. "Besides, Rumble's got things covered at HQ. I just felt like... taking a walk." Practically glowing with innocence, he skipped alongside them, ten steps to Soundwave's one. "Nice weather we're having, huh?" Soundwave stifled a small sigh. Frenzy had already moved on to Jazz, weaving back and forth across the walkway in a way that forced Jazz to be careful where he stepped.

"So, like, whose idea was this anyway, this 'walk' thing? Was it yours?"

"Frenzy, I promise you, nothing about this situation was my idea." Wryly Jazz rattled his chains. "Mind gettin' out from under my pedes, before you get not-so-accidentally crushed?"

"Hah, as if you would. So where you going, anyway? Will you buy more treats?"

"Negative," Soundwave said firmly. "No destination. Activity, necessary for Jazz's health."

"I should have guessed." Frenzy made a face. "Well, whatever. At least you're being useful."

He tossed that comment with a disdainful sneer in Jazz's direction, who graciously bowed his head. "I live only for the glow of your approval, little red one."

"That's Master Little Red One to you."

Frenzy smirked at Jazz and gave up trying to trip him, turning his attention back to Soundwave. "So I got news for you - serious slag went down on Earth this morning. Motormaster almost nailed Sideswipe. It was an awesome chase; they sent us the satellite video. Couldn't believe the moves that 'bot pulled, he would swerve in one direction and then *screee* slide off in the other -"

"Frenzy." Soundwave doused the word with strict admonishment, pointedly looking at Jazz.

Who smiled charmingly. "What? Don't mind me, master. It's not as if it's a secret, you know. Blue told me. Sideswipe's turned up in central Asia, and the Stunticons got slapped with the unfortunate task of tracking him down. Old news; please continue."

"You don't seem worried," Frenzy observed, looking a shade disappointed. He'd been trying to get a more interesting reaction, no doubt.

"I'm not worried," Jazz answered airily. "Sides is not a mech easily caught. Prowl couldn't ever manage it, and he slept just down the hall. That redneck in purple paint has no chance."

"Even with every two-bit human village in Afghanistan calling to report when they see him?" Frenzy pointed out, with malicious glee. "Humans turnin' on the bots. Must bring back good memories for you."

Jazz's smile didn't slip. "You are goading me, little mech. I don't appreciate it."

"You're not here to appreciate anything, *slave*," Frenzy retorted, while quickly comming Soundwave to ask what 'goading' meant.

"Besides, I'm not holding a grudge about that. What's past is past."

"C'mon, they sold you out."

"No, their leaders sold us out. Always knew it was a mistake for their governments to merge like they did, too easy for a single dictator to get greedy. Had he consulted us, we could have warned him that Megatron would fuck him and his cohorts over in the end. So I say the government got what it deserved, but not the people. They didn't deserve that at all."

Now Frenzy looked a little confused. "So, you don't care that they're siding with the 'Cons against Sideswipe?"

"I care, but I'm not surprised. Megatron's rule is all these people have ever known." It was Jazz's turn to sigh. "Wish they didn't have such short lifespans. The last generation would have never stood for all this. They knew what was worth fighting for."

"*Frenzy.*" This time Soundwave made sure his warning came through loud and clear. "*Stop. Now.*"

"*What? I'm just talking to him. Thought that's what you wanted. I'm getting to know the new pet.*"

"*Your conversation, provoking him. Antagonism, unnecessary.*"

"*I only asked a few questions,*" Frenzy huffed. "*It's not like I'm picking a fight or nothin'. I'm no human. I wasn't the one that hung Autobot City out to dry.*"

"*Loss of comrades, likely painful to remember. Reactions, upset and distress.*"

"*He looks fine to me- uh... actually, where is he?*"

Soundwave's systems sputtered a little when he realized Jazz was no longer by his elbow. Or behind him, or anywhere at all around him. Did he actually -

"Too slow," Jazz remarked smugly, from above. Both his and Frenzy's face flipped upward, to find Jazz poised on top of the streetside wall. "Should keep a closer optic on your property, Soundwave. What if I... got lost?"

"Come down, now."

"Does it make you ner~vous?" Jazz sang, prancing backward with neat and precise steps, not even looking at his own pedes. "You don't have to worry. I never fall."

"Irrelevant, order given. Come down now."

"How'd you do that?" Frenzy looked disturbingly awed. "Get up there so fast? You don't even have anti-grav!"

"Anti-grav," Jazz informed Frenzy, "is for amateurs."

"Jazz," Soundwave reprimanded impatiently. A few of the passing mechs had begun to stare.

"This is a new angle to see you, Soundwave, I kinda like looking down on you."

"Jazz..."

"I don't want to come down. You're talking about me on your comms and I don't like it. I'm not made of glass. You think I can't handle talking about the end of the war? I live with the consequences of it every day! A conversation isn't going to break me, Soundwave, so stop treating me like it will." In one neat, sharp turn he'd twisted around and was now striding forward, prompting Soundwave to keep walking and keep up.

"Come down, or I will collect you."

"Getting flown home in your arms is probably not the exercise Hook had in mind. I'll come down, if you stop worrying about whether I can handle a little history."

Soundwave's vents sighed in exasperation. "Terms acceptable. Agreed."

He lifted his arms, thinking of catching Jazz, but it was unnecessary. Jazz tucked his chained arms close to his chest and twisted sharply heels over head, landing gracefully on the walkway with hardly a sound. Surprise and admiration rose in a whoosh of murmurs from watching mecha, and Frenzy was practically hopping with amazement.

"Wow! That was so cool! How'd you do tha..." He caught Soundwave's disapproval and coughed, rebooting his vocalizer. "I mean, uh, bad slave. Don't do that again."

Soundwave closed the distance between them and latched an unforgiving grip on Jazz's arm.

"Remainder of walk will continue in this manner."

"I think I did make you nervous."

"Frenzy, dismissed."

"Uh, right." Frenzy scampered into the crowd and disappeared, off to share every detail with his brother. Soundwave's other hand grasped Jazz firmly by the chin, ensuring he had his complete attention.

"Impertinence will not be repeated."

"Not without a wall, anyway."

"Jazz." He tightened his grip, and Jazz winced.

"Impertinence," he sighed, "will not be repeated."

"Good." He released Jazz's face, who popped his jaw experimentally, then smiled.

"And anyway, maybe next time I'll let you catch me."

Then of all things, he winked.

---

Ravage had begun, in his own willful, stubborn way, to thaw. Soundwave realized it when he booted up one morning, sensors automatically lining up to reel off their data input. Highest priority, before even auditory or visual, was always proximity and status of his symbiotes. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw: distant. They were still out patrolling. Rumble and Frenzy: safely near. They must still be in the loft. Ravage: arms' length. Once visual came online, he confirmed that Ravage was sprawled out on the floor alongside the berth, systems humming in the long, low rotations of deep recharge.

It was an improvement. Ravage still refused to hop onto the berth if Jazz was there but, outside of recharging within Soundwave himself, this was the first time Ravage had deigned to sleep in the same room as the Autobot. Pleased, Soundwave nudged Jazz awake.

"Mnf. Lemme alone."

Soundwave traced a line along Jazz's jawline with his thumb, back and forth until irritably Jazz knocked it away. "I'm *asleep*. Stop molesting me."

"Recommendation, quiet." Soundwave placed a finger over Jazz's mouth. "Ravage present, recharging."

"Well wake him up instead," Jazz grumped, deliberately rolling away from Soundwave and curling up into a tight ball. "I was having a nice dream - it involved feeding myself. You wouldn't understand."

He'd been speaking in English. Soundwave had to scan non-priority archives for the meaning of 'dream', a phenomenon unique to humans, and concluded that Jazz was talking nonsense. He tugged Jazz back over onto his back.

"Open mouth."

"See, I knew it."

"Open mouth."

Jazz made a few more grumbling noises, more to satisfy his own pride than to mount any real argument, and finally opened his mouth. Soundwave inserted his morning energon treat, relishing the way Jazz's lips felt against his fingers, then sat up. Carefully he stepped over Ravage when he got off the berth.

"Caution advised. Ravage lying across large portion of floor."

"Beware the demon cat, got it."

Soundwave wondered if Jazz took the warning seriously. It really was amazing, how such a small creature could manage to sprawl over so much area, and Ravage didn't take kindly to anyone, sibling or not, treading on his tail. If Jazz, half-asleep, stepped on Ravage, Soundwave had no doubt Jazz would lose a leg from the knee joint down.

"Jazz."

"What?"

"Danger, considerable."

"So you said."

"Into my arms."

Jazz's visor snapped on in a flash. "Oh for Primus' sake."

Soundwave wasn't prepared for the way Jazz uncoiled himself out of huddled recharge. In one seamless, silent move, he braced one pede against the edge of the berth, tipped off it, caught Soundwave's shoulder and used it as a fulcrum to flip over. He finished off the move by sliding right down Soundwave's back, landing gracefully on his own two pedes, now on the other side of Soundwave from Ravage.

"I can't believe you think I'm klutzy enough to trip on that walking shredder. How many times, over the last two hundred vorns, do you think I've had to creep around that cat - and this while he was awake? I know all about Ravage, and how to avoid him. You insult me, Soundwave. You really do."

Jazz tossed him a haughty look and moved to open the door, making a show of stretching his struts like he was still half-asleep. He didn't seem to notice how easily he'd just touched Soundwave, or the implicit trust he'd shown in doing so. Soundwave decided it was even better than just scooping up an unwilling Jazz into his arms, and tagged a non-urgent mental note to get Ravage some kind of treat later that orn.

Meanwhile, he followed Jazz out into the main living room. The twins were awake, still piled together on the couch where they'd fallen into recharge last night, but their optics were bright and alert.

"Morning, Soundwaaaave," they chorused, in a way that made him promptly stop short and take stock. Their optics were *too* bright, their voices too cheerful, and he'd have to be telepathically deaf to not feel the eager anticipation dancing through their minds.

"Confess activity," he ordered flatly, subroutine of *prank-catch-punish* falling into place on its own accord. They looked terribly wounded.

"Confess? We didn't do nothin'."

"Yeah! 'We' didn't do nothin'."

"Oh yuck!" Jazz yelped, before Soundwave could properly analyze that last remark. Only a step or two in front of him, Jazz almost jumped right back into Soundwave. "What the hell is *that*?"

'That' was apparently what the twins were waiting for, because they promptly dissolved into laughter. Soundwave took a look at the floor, and smothered a small sigh.

"Ravage," he explained. "Particular... habit."

A habit that had been in place for a long time, to Soundwave's frequent dismay. The subterranean levels of Cybertron were crawling with activated but nonsentient robots, on which Ravage enjoyed practicing his hunting skills. Glitchmice were a favorite. The first time he brought a mangled body home, Soundwave had been so pleased by this apparent acknowledgement of his mastery that he did not scold Ravage.

That was the mistake. From then on, it had been indelibly programmed into Ravage's processor that his little trophies belonged in the center of Soundwave's floor. No amount of chiding or punishment could alter it. All Soundwave could do, he'd learned, was activate the cleaning drones, and he proceeded to do exactly that.

"I take it back," Jazz muttered, wrinkling his nasal plating into a grimace as the little drones circled around the mess. "I *didn't* know all about Ravage. I'm sorry I do now. Charming household you got here, Soundwave, really. I am so lucky to live here."

Soundwave ignored the sarcasm in favor of checking the drones. One of them wasn't performing in sync with the other two, its little wheels spinning at a slower pace as it tried to maneuver its scoop under the ex-glitchmouse. Odd, since they all responded to the same transmission signal. Perhaps they needed -

The scooping drone twitched, turned itself halfway around, and raised its scoop with a sharp jerk. The mutilated rodent flew through the air and splattered, with an ugly sticky *slap*, against Jazz's chest.

Silence.

Jazz, for the first time since he came under this roof, seemed to have been stricken completely speechless. A severed fluid line peeled off his armor and landed with a plop on the floor, and all he could do was just stand there and gape in horrified shock.

Correction, *that* was what the twins had been waiting for. They started howling with laughter so hard that their systems had to run to full power to keep up, and Rumble fell off the couch, frantically beating a fist against the floor.

"Rumble," Soundwave said coldly. "Frenzy."

"*You can't prove it was us!*" Rumble shouted, too consumed in laughter to speak out loud.

"*Yeah! You don't know that we saw the mess and quickly hacked into the cleaning drone and remotely controlled it to aim at Jazz! It just malfunctioned!*" Their vents were wheezing with the effort of expelling heat, and both of them were gasping for air. Annoyance began to kindle within Soundwave. He was preparing to mete out instant and unforgiving punishment when something whipped through the air. A tiny metal foot, gooey with fluids and semi-digested energon, hit Rumble squarely in the forehead. His laughter cut off with a startled "ow!" and then "ew!" Frenzy did the same in almost the next nanoklik when a half-chewed air filter got him on the shoulder.

"Of course you realize," Jazz said darkly, "this means war."

"Hey, you can't -" The head, with part of its spinal strut still attached, smacked Rumble in the chest in a way that said Jazz very much *could*.

"Ew, gross! Take it back!" Rumble snatched it and threw it right back at Jazz, who dove aside in a spectacular ground roll that got him halfway across the room. The couch gave him temporary cover and he peeled two more indistinguishable parts of robot anatomy off himself, throwing them out with pinpoint accuracy when the twins showed themselves. They shrieked with disgust and laughter, then scrambled to outflank Jazz and throw his own ammunition right back at him. Jazz was outnumbered but he was fast and agile, deftly spinning and leaping to keep clear. The three of them turned Soundwave's living room into a war zone, disgusting bits of glitchmouse flying back and forth, and all Soundwave could do was stand still and stare.

Beyond one initial, fleeting impulse, he did not consider stopping it. The hysterical giggling of the twins, colored by the giddy delight he could feel through the link, would not let him stop it. They were having fun. When was the last time they had fun? For that matter, when was the last time they even put the effort into a dedicated, worthwhile prank? Too long ago.

Neither did he miss Jazz's laughter.

Into all this chaos his other two cassettes entered, and squawked in surprise and confusion at what they found. Wings beating back and forth, Buzzsaw tried to back out of danger too late. A stray missile in the form of shredded metallic hide got him on the chest and nearly knocked him to the ground.

"*Revolting!*" He screeched his displeasure to the world. "*Who?*"

"Oh lighten up, Buzzbrain!" Frenzy called out cheerfully. "We're having a foodfight with Ravage's food! Think fast!"

Buzzsaw didn't think fast enough, and got a glob of 'something' splattered across his front. In a fury he tore after Frenzy, who yelped and sprinted a circuit around the room until Jazz and Rumble pelted Buzzsaw with enough mouse bits to force him off. Laserbeak had the sense to stay on Soundwave's shoulder, out of the line of fire, but she chirped and clicked her amusement. Ravage, the cause of all this trouble, continued to sleep peacefully in the other room.

It took a while, but eventually the frantic fun wound itself down. By the time it did, the room and everyone in it, minus Soundwave and Laserbeak, were covered in sticky patches of mech fluid and tiny fragments of one thoroughly shredded glitchmouse. Rumble and Frenzy were sprawled out on their backs, wheezing for ventilation, and Jazz wasn't much better off, barely managing to keep upright on his knees. Buzzsaw pretended to sulk about the smears of fluid all over his armor, but everyone (except Jazz) knew he'd just been tired out.

"Visit to washracks, necessary." Soundwave approached Jazz and held out a hand; Rumble opened one optic.

"Oh sure. Let the *Autobot* go first."

"Rumble and Frenzy, original perpetrators. Still considering punishment."

"Aw..."

"*Du börde inte,*" Jazz panted, in Swedish. "*You shouldn't. They're not ignoring me. Isn't that what you wanted?*"

"Behavior, not acceptable."

"*If that were true, you'd have stopped it. I think you liked it. Just let it go.*" Surprisingly enough, Jazz actually put his hand in Soundwave's rather than push himself to stand on his own. The soft metal plating was warm from his overheated systems. "*Besides, now you get to scrub me down, and we all know you love that. Just let it go.*"

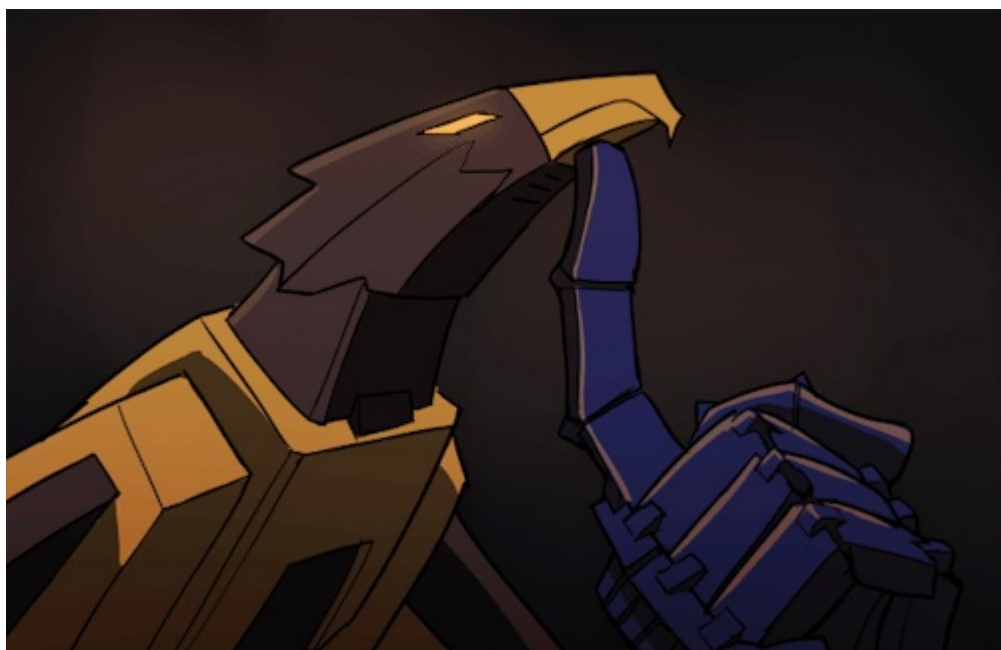
"Autobot, defending Cassetticons?"

Jazz shrugged, offering him a lopsided grin. "*Stranger things have happened.*"

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Brilliantly coincidental art by Shokveyv (<http://shokveyv.tumblr.com>)





## on control

### Chapter Notes

Some of my alert readers had to point out to me that Chapter 7 was not showing up for the public, even though I could see it. Turns out it was stuck in Draft Mode. Sorry! So if you haven't already, I advise you go back and read chapter 7 now, as the events in chapter 8 will make a whole lot more sense when you do.

Jazz's pedes moved lightly, one directly in front of the other, stepping in perfect time to the beat. Another day, another walk, and this time they were wandering through the marketplace again. Jazz was getting so bored with the other route, and Soundwave had had quite enough of his attempts to liven things up – either by walking on the wall, or walking on his hands, or – Primus help him – both at the same time. This place, at least, kept his interest. And it wasn't such a bad thing, to watch him step so pertly to the blaring Earth music, all quickness and grace as he added an extra *skip-turn*. No, not bad at all. Soundwave stopped in front of the stall itself.

"Jazz."

His slave stopped what he was doing and pranced up to Soundwave's elbow. "You monotoned?"

"State preference." He gestured at the datacard selection. "Any of them, yours."

The light behind Jazz's visor, which had been glowing bright blue, went a little flat. "What? Why?"

"Enjoyment evident. Objective, increase your enjoyment."

"I told you, Soundwave, I don't play my own music anymore. Why would I want to add to it?"

"Resistance, not understood."

"Jazz, not surprised."

He turned on his heel and started walking; Soundwave hurried to intercept. "Music, important to you. Refusal to play, incomprehensible."

"What do you care? You don't know classic rock from *classical*. What does it matter to you if I ever play any of my files again?"

"Delight in music, intriguing to watch." Delicately Soundwave touched Jazz's jawline; Jazz leaned his head away. "Jazz, graceful, agile."

"Did you want a lap dance, baby?" Jazz's open palms ghosted across the glass of his chest, his smile sugared-oil sweet until he pushed himself clear. "Sorry, but that costs extra."

He made to walk past Soundwave but stopped short for some reason, struts stiffening just a little.

"Oh. Damn. Just when I was having an almost mildly tolerable day."

All three seekers of Megatron's Second Trine, popularly nicknamed the Cone Trine, stared right back. Soundwave, unusually enough, was slightly flustered by their sudden appearance. He'd been paying attention to Jazz, not his surroundings, and now he wasn't sure if any of them had been close enough to hear any of that. And even if they weren't, they'd certainly seen.

Dirge was the first to speak. "Hey, Soundwave. Having fun with Warp's leftovers?"

"He looks perky enough," Ramjet observed, optics moving over Jazz with a little too much interest. "All clean and shiny. Does Soundwave rub you down every night, slave, does he make you *sparkle*?"

"Don't you have turbopuppies to go kick," Jazz asked coolly, "somewhere else?"

"Oh, but we have Groove for that." Thrust smiled gleefully and pinched his slave's cheek, who winced and hissed with pain. The light behind Jazz's visor narrowed. "We find him very easy to kick."

"Still with just the one slave, huh, boys? What's the matter, Megatron forgot to give you another one *again*? Funny how it keeps slippin' his mind."

Sneers were instantly wiped out by scowls. "That's not your business, slave."

"Apparently, it's not yours either. Do let me know when Megatron finally 'remembers' you. We'll have to throw a party to celebrate your... importance."

"Silence." Soundwave clapped a large hand on Jazz's shoulder, pulling him back a step from where Ramjet stood curling his fists. "Seekers, dismissed."

War's end or not, Soundwave was still head of Surveillance and Communications in the Decepticon empire, and he outranked most of the air force. The seekers were still glaring spitefully at Jazz, looking like they wanted to smash him into the ground, but Soundwave tightened his grip on Jazz and stared them down.

"Now," he added, when they didn't back off quickly enough. Wings twitched with resentment, but the trine finally took a hint.

"See you at headquarters, Soundwave," Thrust muttered. "If you can remember where it is."

All three stalked away, deliberately shoving past any of the crowd that didn't see them in time to jump clear. Groove, laden down with purchases that they could have stored in their subspaces (but didn't), had to hurry to catch up. Jazz tried to touch him, perhaps a comforting pat on the arm, but with Soundwave holding him in place he couldn't reach. Groove only had time to meet Jazz's gaze for a single nanoklik, optics haunted with misery, before he scurried away.

Under his hand, he felt Jazz slump a little with disappointment. "Well. Wasn't that fun? You can let go of me now; I'm not going to go running after them for more of the same."

Cautiously Soundwave released his grip. Then he tried to pet Jazz on the head for comfort, but Jazz took a step forward and avoided it just in time.

"Megatron lies."

Soundwave tried to, but couldn't, follow the non-sequiter. Jazz wasn't looking at him. He was watching the seekers and their slave disappear into the crowd. "Explain."

"He likes to talk about being generous, that he let us Autobots live because he was gracious and forgiving. That's a lie. He'd have lined every one of us up to put a cannon shot through the head if he had the option, but he didn't. He needed us, not just for energon production on Earth, but as payment. When they win a war, soldiers expect reward. Megatron can't afford to give huge deposits in fuel; Cybertron needs it. And he won't parcel out control over the city-states, because like hell he'll just hand over feudal power to someone like Starscream. War prisoners were all he had to give.

"Of course, it worked out pretty well for him. His top soldiers get a status symbol to drag around Iacon, which doubles as a warning to Neutrals and enticement for the lower rank 'Cons. He dangles the unclaimed Autobots like a prize to be won for mechs like our cone boys over there, the mechs that aren't quite so happy with what they got. And if one of his followers should anger him, well, then the slave is something that Megatron can take away as punishment. Last but not least, it shifts the cost of fuel and upkeep off the empire's coffers and onto the individual masters. A brilliant power play, really. And the best part, for him, is that most of the 'Cons can't even see it."

They were out of sight now. Soundwave did not allow himself to show any reaction to Jazz's surprising comments. Not that he was saying anything Soundwave didn't already know, but it was slightly unsettling to hear it come from the mouth of one of the slaves.

"Starscream knows," Jazz continued, idly swinging around a lamppost. "If there's any mech that knows manipulation when he sees it, it's Screamer. And this thing with Skyfire, it's drivin' him crazy. But Megatron's got a solid grip on Cybertron, and seekers aren't *quite* so valuable these days without a war going on, so Starscream's watchin' his step. Bitching, sure; plotting, no. Least, not when I was still in their towers."

He swung all the way around, and finally took a good look at Soundwave. "What? It's not my fault that I have optics and audios."

"Decepticon politics, not your concern."

"So you said before. But I think I've just given a good explanation for why they *are* my concern, and yours too. You should be careful, master. Now that you have me, you're in Megatron's debt too. I wonder if hiding from HQ all the time is really the best strategy."

"Actions, not hiding."

"Does Megatron see it that way?" Jazz tipped his head back against the post, for just a moment looking so deadly serious that Soundwave felt a twinge of disquiet. "Something to think about, Soundwave. Something to think about hard."

---

Even when he was sitting still, Jazz danced. Humming low in his vocalizer, his fingertips bounced lightly across the hax set, passing by at least three likely and viable moves before finally settling on a low-ranking pawn. In the most nonsensical of moves, he pushed it forward and up, deeper into Soundwave's territory.

"There! Have fun breaking your brain over the meaning of that little maneuver." Jazz shot him a wicked grin. "I am assuming here that you do have some notion of 'fun', of course."

A dangerous remark. On anyone else Soundwave would have found that flippant tone and smile an

irritating display of insubordination; on Jazz he found it extremely appealing. Lately, Soundwave seemed to be noticing that appeal more and more. It came to him when he heard Jazz's laughter, or saw him smile, or watched him *tap-tap* to strains of music in the air. And right now, Soundwave's idea of 'fun' meant indulging himself in long-belayed temptation.

"Uh, Soundwave?" Jazz looked to be peering at him, a little quizzical in expression. "I know you always like to take a breem to get warmed up, but your visor's just about gone out. Still with me?"

Jazz had proven himself comfortable with small, casual touches. If Soundwave were to push him just a little, how would he respond? Perhaps this was the time to find out.

"Estimation: twins returning in fewer than five breems. Time insufficient to consider next move."

"So? You got anything better to do?"

Soundwave leveled a silent and meaningful look across the table, and when Jazz understood, his smile faded.

"*Oh*. I see. Are you... sure you wouldn't just rather keep playing hax? If you ask me, I think you still have time to pull off one more move. You're smart. You don't need much time."

Soundwave stood, and extended a hand to Jazz. "Your choice: berth, or couch?"

Jazz looked faintly horrified to be asked to choose, and stayed stuck to his chair. Soundwave dropped his vocalizer a notch in volume, which was essentially all he could do to soften his tone.

"Jazz. Your choice."

His slave shuddered, but somehow made himself place his hand in Soundwave's. "Couch."

"Come."

Soundwave closed a gentle grip over Jazz's hand and backed across the room, trying to guide Jazz rather than pull roughly. To his credit, Jazz didn't panic and try to break away, but he walked stiffly, arm pulled as taut as he could manage. Soundwave sat when he reached his destination, and firmly pulled Jazz into his lap. Jazz smothered a small squeak within his vocalizer and tried to push himself off; Soundwave snatched his other hand and pulled back, holding Jazz back flush against his chest. In no time all of Jazz's vents flipped open, exhaling nervous puffs of air, and Soundwave could feel the pulse of his spark accelerate.

"Ch-Christmas time already?" Jazz tried to cover his nervousness with a forced lightness in his tone, and failed. "Goody for me. This year I want a pony, and a toy train, not Astrotrain, had enough of him- ah!" He interrupted himself with a startled gasp when Soundwave retracted his mask and flicked his glossa against one of the wires in Jazz's neck. Again Jazz squirmed to get away, but here on Soundwave's lap his pedes did not even touch the floor. Soundwave's grip on both his wrists did not relent for so much as a nanoklik.

"Resistance, futile," he reminded his slave. "Remain still."

"You don't want to do this, Soundwave. I probably taste -" Again he strangled a whimper in his throat when Soundwave tickled another wire. "*Terrible*."

"Assertion... very incorrect." Soundwave shuttered his visor and nuzzled Jazz more intimately, nipping and licking at his wires with delicate precision. Electricity sizzled at every contact, dancing on the tip of his glossa like crackled energon. Heat uncurled itself within Soundwave. Jazz's spark

was not the only one pulsing faster.

"D-don't do this, Soundwave. Don't- ah! – don't try to make it good."

"Pleasure, not desirable?"

"Not from you. Not from a Decepticon!" Soundwave teased one of his sensor relays and Jazz practically jumped straight up off his lap, biting back a cry that could have been dismay or desire. Soundwave tightened his grip and went back for the same sensor wire, tracing a light line up and down along it. Jazz writhed helplessly, legs flailing with what Soundwave thought was useless panic until his pedes began to bang ruthlessly against Soundwave's shins.

"Stop that."

"Let me go!"

"Negative. Jazz, mine. Order is to remain still, and accept pleasure."

"It's not pleasure! I don't want it and I don't want *you*."

"You will. Reminder: Jazz, prisoner and slave. Soundwave patient, outcome inevitable." He indulged himself in another long, slow lick, and Jazz growled, kicking frantically against Soundwave's legs.

"Stop resistance. Accept pleasure."

"Never," Jazz panted. His fans were spinning at top speed, the heat of his small body smoldering against Soundwave's armor. It felt incredibly good, but the repeated banging against his shins was marring his enjoyment. Soundwave recalled a tactic that had often worked with Ravage, that first vorn.

"Resistance, prolonging session. Cease, submit, and session will finish sooner."

Jazz snarled and kicked him again. Soundwave winced, then retaliated with another light nibble on Jazz's neck.

"Session now extended for one breem. Resistance continued?"

Jazz kicked him extra hard that time, as if to prove something, and Soundwave bit a little harder. Some of these marks might be permanent, if any mech cared to look closely. "Session now extended for two breems. Resistance continued?"

"Nice try, Soundwave," Jazz growled. "But your little minions will be home soon, and you've got your schedule to keep. You won't put off working, just to keep snacking on my neck."

"Session will last as long as necessary," Soundwave assured his slave. "Audience desired? Rumble and Frenzy will watch until we finish."

That one, at last, struck the right nerve wire. Jazz's pedes stopped banging against Soundwave's legs and he subsided with a shudder.

Pleased, Soundwave curled Jazz closely against his chest again, stimulating a fresh wave of heat inside his own body. While his mouth continued to explore Jazz's neck, one hand glided over the smooth finish of Jazz's chest. His armor was clamping shut again; Soundwave could feel it.

"Accept pleasure," he repeated, vocalizer dialed down to its lowest pitch.

"I told you, Soundwave," Jazz whispered. "You can make me do things. You can't make me like them."

Soundwave's response was to trace a fingertip around the seam of Jazz's headlight, and the airflow through his vents faltered. Jazz had to gasp for some through his mouth. A sensitive spot, then. Smugly Soundwave repeated the action on the other headlight, and Jazz swallowed a tiny moan. Soundwave moved his mouth around to the other side of Jazz's neck and nipped a fresh sensor wire, still encircling the glass headlight with one finger. Those fans of his were spinning harder now, all vents open wide and cycling air furiously. Soundwave's own vents were none too quiet either, now; that heat was growing.

Jazz must have felt it. His sparkbeat was hammering a frantic staccato within his chest, the ventilation that he needed through his mouth coming in ragged pants. When Soundwave's other hand dipped into the crevasse of his hip and fondled another wire, he bucked hard, arching his back against Soundwave with a moan he could not conceal. Twice Jazz tried to roll limply off of Soundwave's lap, but Soundwave snagged a grip on his waist and pulled him back to where he belonged. After more than a breem of it, Jazz wasn't trying that anymore.

The electricity was almost dancing from Jazz's exposed wires onto Soundwave's glossa and fingertips. Surge after surge reared up within his body, demanding release - specifically, demanding to be released into Jazz. It would be so easy to throw him face down on the couch, grind his body against the other, to force the surges between his considerably-loosened armor plates.

But no. With difficulty, Soundwave held himself in check. Jazz belonged to him, and Soundwave did not harm what was his. And someday, Jazz would open his legs willingly for it. This was inevitable; Jazz was his.

It lasted for exactly two breems and no longer, true to Soundwave's word. Reluctantly he withdrew his exploring fingers and straightened, mask snapping back over his face. "Session complete," he announced. "Jazz, now permitted to stand."

Jazz didn't move, huddled and shaking on Soundwave's lap, fists curling and uncurling where he'd braced them against his knees.

"Jazz, now permitted to -"

"Shh. I'm thinking."

What? Soundwave was so nonplussed that he did not react, and in that nanoklik Jazz finally moved. Not forward, but backward. Without warning or effort he shoved himself back into Soundwave's chest, arching his spinal struts so completely that with a turn of his head his lip plating was almost brushing over Soundwave's left audio receptor.

"Yes," he breathed, "thinking hard. I have been doing it for a long time and I still don't have the answers I want so I will ask you. Soundwave. Master. What do you want?"

"Surrender," Soundwave answered, startled and suddenly uneasy. "Submission."

"No, Soundwave. That's everyone in this house. What do you want with *me*?" Was that Jazz's hand, cupping his jaw, keeping him from leaning away from the tickle of Jazz's lips? "You came to the table for me that night of the game, I know you did, I could see it in your stare. And I hoped to Primus I was wrong, but no such luck. You toyed with Skywarp, kept him alive even though you could have wiped him out anytime you wanted, forcing him to up the pot again and again until he'd have nothing left but me. I would have warned the stupid glitch if I thought there was half a chance

he'd listen. You called me undesirable but that wasn't true, not for you. You wanted me. Why, Soundwave, after all this time, did you suddenly decide that you wanted Autobot Jazz in your berth?"

Silence. Jazz pressed himself even closer, which hadn't seemed possible, and his lips were more than just tickling now.

"You've had a thousand chances now and still you won't just rape me. Whatever it is you're looking for, it's more than an easy 'face. What do you want, Soundwave? Is it the jokes? Am I your court jester? Something to amuse you here in your lonely tower of exile? Why did you lock yourself away from the world, and why are you looking to me to fill the void that it left? What do you want? *What do you want?*"

"Enough," Soundwave finally managed. "Stop."

"Tell me the truth, Soundwave. Tell me what you want."

"Stop!"

Soundwave braced his hands against Jazz and shoved, with all his considerable strength. Jazz toppled off his lap and hit the floor in what should have been a clumsy thud. But it was Jazz, and he rolled gracefully head over heels back into a standing position, facing Soundwave. There was nothing submissive about his slave now. His visor glittered with determination, drive, and a dangerous intelligence. Icy blue light pinned him there to the couch, and Soundwave could do nothing but return the stare in silence.

What would have happened if the twins hadn't returned just then, Soundwave would never know. But the noisy whoosh of the opening door and their cheerful greeting broke the spell of the moment. Jazz's aggressive posture relaxed, his shoulders dropping, and he took a step back.

"I think we'll call this one a draw." Dark was the grin that flickered across his face. "Until next time. *Master.*"

---

"Hey, boss?"

"Everything okay?"

The time for upload was over. The twins had popped back into their root modes, wearing identical expressions of concern and suspicion that he resolutely ignored.

"Adequate description: fine. Concern unnecessary."

"Cuz it sorta feels like you're covering something."

"Yeah, something feels a little too quiet."

Soundwave's hands did not even falter, gliding across the console with practiced ease. An impassive appearance had always been easy for him, thanks to his build. But appearance meant nothing to his symbiotes, and it was a different thing altogether to paint over that chaotic whirl of grief, pain, and fear. Rumble and Frenzy tilted to their heads to the side, simultaneously, a sight that usually amused

him.

"Did something happen?"

"With Jazz?"

"And was it good or bad?"

Well, he could hardly deny anything happened. Being as short as they were gave his cassettes a slightly different view of the world, and they often saw what a full-sized mech missed. Right now they were looking at his well-scuffed shin armor.

"Tie," Soundwave said simply.

They looked confused. "Tie?"

"Affirmative. Dismissed."

They exchanged baffled looks. He concentrated on pleasant memories, like Jazz petting Laserbeak, laughing so freely during the Great Rat Fight (as dubbed by the twins), moaning while Soundwave nibbled on his neck. His stress eased, emotions warmed, and the twins relaxed.

"Okay..."

"If you say so." They clumped back out into the common room and the door swished shut behind them. And Soundwave, once left alone, was surprised to realize that he actually did feel better.

Never mind those things Jazz said. He said them because he'd been frightened, desperate to make Soundwave retreat, and frightened he well should be. Soundwave had elicited so many moans of pleasure there on the couch; Jazz must have been in a panic at what his master could make him feel. If he was that scared, then Soundwave really was winning. Jazz would lose at his own game yet.

Thus reassured, Soundwave spent the next joor and a half sorting through the twins' raw data, cataloging small anomalies, and drafting his report. By the time he finished, he already knew what he would do. He would enter the common room, every inch the tall, intimidating master, and coldly order Jazz to polish his legs. He would have Jazz *kneel* before him and polish his legs. And if he resisted he would be punished in short order, with Rumble and Frenzy to witness. That should serve as adequate reminder to Jazz of his place in this household.

The door slid aside. The twins were deep into some new video game, battling Earth zombies while slurping on their evening rations. Jazz was in his usual corner, pecking away at his datapad. He looked up at the sound of the door, and had the brazen wires to smile.

"Jazz."

"Yes, my love?"

Soundwave's vents hitched and stalled out. Rumble, who happened to be right in the middle of refueling, lost control of his intakes and sprayed a mouthful of energon all over Frenzy. Who spluttered indignantly, but couldn't find the words to form a complaint, shocked optics locked on Jazz. For his part, Jazz's charmingly innocent smile could have lit most of Iacon.

"Whaa..." Rumble was the first one to find his voice. "What did you just say?"

"My master Soundwave just addressed me. I was merely inquiring as to why, for unlike him, I cannot read minds."



Now the twins' stunned stare flipped over to him, to see his reaction - *fanatically eager* to see his reaction. The nanoklik their gaze was off him, Jazz's angelic smile shifted into a sly grin.

Triumphantly he wiggled four fingers and mouthed, "*Jazz.four.*"

Soundwave's hands briefly curled into fists, but he forced them to relax open again.

"Jazz, fetch polish." His voice served him well. Not so much as a waver did it let slip. "See to my legs."

"Right away, love. I think the premium hard wax, rather than high gloss, don't you? Those are some nasty scuff marks we need to buff out." Gaily humming, as if this was all quite ordinary, Jazz collected all the necessary polishing elements and knelt in front of the couch. Soundwave had to remind himself to move forward and sit. The twins' characters had long since died horrible deaths on the screen but they didn't seem to have noticed, still boggling at the two of them.

*"Rumble. Frenzy."*

*"Our game waits, return to it, we know."*

They hunched their shoulders and went back to their controllers, though not without the occasional sidelong glance. Jazz didn't seem to notice, vigorously rubbing wax into Soundwave's legs. When he'd almost reached the knee, Soundwave tipped forward and grasped Jazz's chin, holding him momentarily still.

"This, not over."

"I'd be most surprised if it was," Jazz assured him.

---

Soundwave almost slammed Jazz into the berth that night, pinning his wrists down with a force that made Jazz wince.

"Something wrong, love?"

"Explain."

"Explain what, love? Oh, you mean my little term of endearment. Why, Soundwave? Is it... bothering you?" Jazz lifted his head up off the berth, and he would have tapped his forehead against Soundwave's if Soundwave hadn't pulled away in time. "It's just a word. Does it upset you?"

Soundwave chose not to answer, rather than admit the truth. "Explain it."

"Well, since you won't tell me what it is you want from me, I'm left on my own to guess. Lover seems as good as anything else, don't you think?"

"Sentiment, not sincere."

"Ooh, the rumors are true. You *are* smart."

Soundwave almost crushed Jazz's wrists and Jazz gritted his teeth, swallowing some sound of pain. "Soundwave master, Jazz mine. You will show respect."

"So that's a 'yes', then." Jazz stretched and curved up against Soundwave's weight. "If it upsets you so, lover, then you know how to punish me. Oh wait, no, you still refuse to do that. So I guess

we're both trapped."

Soundwave cycled a full intake's worth of air, releasing it through his vents slowly. "Jazz... very difficult, sometimes."

"You're just now tumbling on to that? Maybe you're not so smart after all. Skywarp could have told you that much."

"Skywarp inferior, Soundwave superior." He noticed he was still clamping a vice grip around Jazz's wrists and relaxed his hold. "Violence unnecessary, other punishment suitable."

"Like what?"

"You will learn. And here -" Soundwave lowered his face again, to just over Jazz's. "- interface, not a punishment."

He could feel Jazz's light ventilations against his mask, and he retracted it. There was no way he could miss how Jazz stiffened underneath him, or the slight uptick in his spark pulse. He had to be afraid Soundwave would kiss him, but he didn't try to turn his head or pull away. He didn't even shutter his visor. He just waited.

This time it was Soundwave's turn to tap his forehead lightly against Jazz's, so close he could all but taste his lips. Tasting his nervous fear was enough.

"Jazz, not in control here. Remember that."

"Neither of us are," Jazz breathed. "*Wild*, isn't it?"

---

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## on truth

"Starscream kicked me."

Silence. Soundwave didn't look up from the hax set, still carefully considering his next move, but he could see Jazz look from the open doorway back to him, a slight quizzical tilt to the head. Frenzy huffed and stomped inside, deliberately clanging his pedes against the floor in a way that produced far too much noise for someone of his size.

"I said *Starscream kicked me*."

Soundwave tipped his head a few degrees toward Frenzy. "Audio relays, functioning. Repetition unnecessary."

"Well aren't you the picture of sympathy. One of your own, your precious and *brilliant* hacker and undoubtedly your *favorite* of the whole team, is wounded by a rampaging seeker and you can't even be bothered to look up from your hax game. Sorry if I'm disturbing your concentration!"

Frenzy popped his thrusters and threw himself into Soundwave's lap, with a groan that could have announced loss of a major limb. His paint was barely scuffed. Jazz looked bemused.

"You're takin' this well."

"Distress, unnecessary."

Maybe if Soundwave had caught even a flicker of pain when it actually happened six breems ago, instead of blustering indignation, he'd be moderately concerned. As it was, the only kind of attention Frenzy needed right now was just that: attention. Obliging Soundwave dropped his free hand onto Frenzy's head.

"I didn't even do anything! Okay, maybe I said something about having wriggled out from under Megatron's heel for a breather, and maybe somethin' about going back under it when he's lonely, and he just kicked me! Right into the wall, like a... whaddya call 'em on Earth, a soccer ball. Fragger."

Frenzy had worked himself into a fine sulk, but it didn't stop him from pushing up underneath Soundwave's hand, leaning into his gentle petting. Soundwave knew Jazz was watching, though he said nothing.

"And do I have the understanding pity of my boss? No. He's more preoccupied with a stupid game. Do I even have the pity of my stupid brother? No. Rumble disappeared off to somewhere and won't even answer my comms, leaving me to suffer all alone. Does anybody care about Frenzy at all? I bet you do, Jazz. You know what it's like to get kicked by a seeker, right?"

Light rolled behind Jazz's visor. "Yeah, Frenzy, it's the same. I truly feel your pain."

Frenzy's systems growled softly at the sarcasm, but he didn't have a handy retort. He hmphed instead and tucked himself more firmly into the crease of Soundwave's lap.

"It's a cruel world for cons my size."

"And yet, your stoic martyrdom is an inspiration to us all."

"Oh, shut up, slave."

*"Je suis surpris, quoique." Jazz propped his chin in his hand and directed that puzzle-solving look of his at Soundwave. "I am surprised, though. Even if he's not hurt, I'd have thought you'd turn Starscream's mind inside out for messing with your brats. I feel let down. Where's that legendary telepathic wrath?"*

"Stop that, I hate it when you do that," Frenzy complained.

"Damage, minimal. Retaliation, wasteful expenditure. Confrontations between seekers and Cassetticons too frequent."

Jazz laughed. "In other words, if you interfered every time you'd get nothing else done?"

"Affirmative."

"I'm right here..." Frenzy glowered at Jazz from underneath Soundwave's hand. Soundwave watched Jazz's gaze drop down, following every soft pet.

*"Or maybe there's something more to it. Maybe you'd rather not advertise to the rest of the Decepticons just how much they mean to you, else you'd be making them into even bigger - or should I say smaller? - targets than they already are."*

Soundwave's hand froze, momentarily, then resumed its task. Jazz had seen, though. He leaned forward with a grin that was positively gloating. *"You softie. I've got your number now."*

"Stop it stop it stop it! You're on Cybertron, speak the right language already!" Frenzy practically bounced on Soundwave's lap in agitation.

"My apologies, Master Little Red One." Jazz leaned back in his seat, still wearing that grin. "So, what would you do if I kicked Frenzy?"

"You'd better not, slave."

"Some punishment, suitable," Soundwave answered coolly. "And, you will not."

"What would you do if Starscream kicked me?"

Again Soundwave's hand stopped moving, for a single nanoklik. "Jazz, mine. Starscream will not."

"Or else..."

"Pain."

Light flickered behind that visor, out of surprise or unease Soundwave wasn't sure. He sensed a twinge of Frenzy's discomfort, and felt him shift a little on his lap. Something in the way he'd uttered that one word sounded much more vicious than he'd intended. Fortunately, at that moment, the front door swished open and Rumble strutted inside.

"I'm home!"

"Finally!" Frenzy exploded, flopping over onto his front so he could shoot a nasty glare at his twin. "Where in the pit have you been? Don't you care that your brother got kicked into the wall by Starscream? Leaving a Frenzy-shaped dent in it, I might add. And as I was limping home, all I could think of was how nice it would be if my brother was there to lend me his shoulder and see me through the journey. You slagger."

"Aw, quit your bitchin'," Rumble tossed back cheerfully. His grin stretched from one side of the room to the other, looking extraordinarily pleased with himself. "It just so happens that I had something important to take care of."

"What could be more important than me, your twin, who shares a spark with you and was programmed alongside you and has saved your rusty hide more times than you can count?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe... this?" With a flourish, he produced a datachip from subspace. It looked like any other datachip to Soundwave, but Frenzy immediately stiffened.

"Is that..."

"Yep."

"How did you..."

"I know mechs that know mechs. Or should I say Stunticons who know people? Who have just handed over to their gracious Decepticon masters a pre-release copy of the new, never-before-seen -"

*"Bourne Ultimatum Chapter 20 - This Time It's Personal.!"*

"That's the one." Rumble was radiating smugness. Casually he blew a speck of dust off his prize. "I take it you've heard of it?"

"You - fragger!" Frenzy tumbled off Soundwave's lap and practically threw himself at his brother, punching him hard on the shoulder. "How'd you keep this a secret from me? WHY'd you keep this a secret from me?"

"Wanted it to be a surprise. And what better way to perk up your orn? It's the cure for the common seeker."

"Damn right. Starscream who? This is going to be twenty kinds of awesome!"

Rumble posed for drama. "Now, who's a genius?"

"You, Rumble, are a genius. You are the *king* of geniuses." They giggled and punched each other some more, and then, simultaneously, fixed Soundwave with bright pleading optics. "You'll watch it with us, won't you, Soundwave?"

"Yeah, it's been forever since we did anything together."

"Please?"

"Pleeeeeease?"

"Psst, I think you're outnumbered," Jazz whispered across the set. "Better surrender."

Soundwave stifled a small sigh. Human entertainment, in his opinion, was farcical in nature and relied on ridiculous twists of logic and coincidence. And for a species so frail and astonishingly short-lived, they had a curious predilection for movies that celebrated their own mortality. They seemed to delight in featuring stories of their own species being gruesomely killed in extraordinary ways. Rumble and Frenzy loved them, though, and while Iacon's market of basic goods was gradually picking itself up off the ground, the planet had nowhere near recovered enough to produce much in the way of culture. Video games, movies, and music were all cherished imports from Earth. Cherished most of all, perhaps, by the two tiny cons standing there and shooting waves of

hope in his direction.

"Affirmative."

"Yes!"

"Wicked! I'll set it up!"

"First, data upload."

"Awww..."

"Can't we do it later? Please?"

"You know Megatron doesn't care if it comes in tonight or tomorrow."

"And nothing interesting happened today anyway."

"Let's watch the movie first. That way, Laserbeak and Buzzsaw can watch too, before they go out."

"And even Ravage is here, right? We should ALL watch it together."

"Because the movie will be just that awesome. Please?"

"Pleeeeeease?"

Oh, for Primus' sake. Soundwave exhaled through his vents with a huff. The twins knew perfectly well that their duties should come first. But now their attention was corrupted, and data upload might be less than complete if they were trying to cut corners. And their notion that everyone could join in *was* appealing. The entire team had not come together to share in something pleasurable since the deaths. Nobody had been in the mood. Anyway, human movies barely lasted half a joor.

"Acceptable," he agreed. "Movie now."

They cheered, and immediately got down to business. Rumble galloped to the console to plug in the movie, and Frenzy vanished into Soundwave's room to drag a recharging Ravage back out. Ravage cared about human entertainment about as much as Soundwave did, but their irrepressible cheer must have affected him too, because he followed his little brother with only a few disdainful grunts. Soundwave released Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, of whom the former did like movies but preferred animation, and the latter probably did like movies but would never ever admit it. Like Ravage, they were pleased by the unexpected happy mood, and perched on the back of the couch with some chirps and clicks. Ravage curled up at Soundwave's feet, pointedly closing his optics in an attempt to finish his nap, and Frenzy curled up on Soundwave's right. They were all here, but Soundwave sensed something was missing. That something was Jazz, retreating into his corner with his usual inconspicuousness.

"Jazz, come."

Jazz flinched and pressed himself against the walls, looking very much like he wished Soundwave hadn't noticed him. "I'm just fine over here, thanks."

"Jazz, come."

"I'm okay, I've got this new level to solve and -"

"Oh, just get over here, Jazz," Rumble snapped impatiently, fiddling with the callibrations of their sound system. "You'll bring his mood down if you argue. *Everybody* has to watch the movie."

Soundwave actually rebooted his audios to check that they were working. From the looks of it, so did Jazz. Surprised white light swept back and forth across his visor, and he stared with his mouth slightly agape.

"Yes sir," he said at last. With the lights falling into darkness, he diffidently crossed the room and approached the couch. No doubt he was thinking about the last time he'd been on it, and he hesitated before trying to sit on the end and well away from Soundwave. Promptly Soundwave reached for his wrist and dragged him closer, pulling him flush against Soundwave's left. Jazz flinched again and tried to pull away, but Soundwave's grip on his wrist was unrelenting. Credits were flickering across the giant screen now, and Rumble dashed back to the couch and threw himself in Soundwave's lap.

Jazz was still a tense bundle of struts next to Soundwave. Surely he must have known Soundwave would do nothing to him right now? Soundwave rubbed his hand, stroking it comfortingly, and with his other guided Jazz's head to rest on his shoulder. It took a breem and a half, but eventually Jazz had no choice but to relax. Just seven human characters had died by the time Soundwave sensed the tension easing out of his frame. Reluctantly, but inevitably, Jazz slumped against Soundwave's sturdy shoulder and stayed that way.

"My point," he murmured, low in his vocalizer. "Soundwave, six."

"Actually I think it's the twins' point," Jazz whispered without missing a beat.

"Quiet," both casseticons snapped in unison, and that was the end of that.

Soundwave had never enjoyed a movie more.

---

The light skip of Jazz's pedes echoed in the halls along with Soundwave's heavier tread, two steps to his one. It was not so crowded in HQ today, at least not yet, but the few Decepticons present still stared agape as if they'd never seen their own comms officer before. Or maybe they were staring at Jazz, who was not letting their presence interfere with his chatty mood.

"- and I think they actually cleaned just for your big return, because I swear I've never seen these halls so sparkling before. Or maybe that's just a flawed memory cache, seeing as how it's been so long. Still, makes for a nice change of scenery. Did you even tell anyone you're coming? Will it be a surprise? Shockwave won't know what to do with himself, he likes being the only officer on deck that Megatron doesn't hit. I think we all know how much Starscream adores you, so the look on his face should be fun to see. Tell him you needed some fresh air... but that you decided to come here anyway. That'll make him fritz! I'm sure I don't have to warn you not to say why you really came."

Jazz nudged his arm and grinned up at him; Soundwave did not respond. "Don't want to acknowledge it, love? I get it, can't admit the slave is right, it's cool. What matters is that you know and I know and we're here now."

Soundwave didn't even look at Jazz. It was true that he wasn't particularly happy to be here, but this cycle he'd felt compelled to present himself to the command center. For all he'd affected not to care, Frenzy's incident with Starscream bothered him a little. Frenzy hadn't been hurt in the slightest, but he didn't like it that Starscream felt cocky enough to go kicking his symbiotes whenever he felt like it; Starscream had gotten too accustomed to Soundwave's distance. In the past, he'd been far more careful about bullying the casseticons. Soundwave merely had to remind him of his presence. He was not, he told himself firmly, here just because of that ominous warning of Jazz's. It was merely a factor. Much as he didn't like it, Soundwave needed to appear here more often. So many things were at stake.

"Do you think we'll be here longer than last time? Just because we can't talk to each other doesn't mean I don't need my time with Percy and Blue, you know, we used to be together all the time before you won that- hey, where are we going? This isn't the way to the command room."

They had turned down the hall that housed senior rank offices. Soundwave still didn't answer but walked to his, rapidly keying in the access code. It wasn't something he ever used, as he did all his surveillance upload and analysis in his home office, but occasionally Rumble and Frenzy used it while serving their shifts here. If it weren't for automatic cleaning drones, most of the equipment would be covered in a layer of dust. The door slid open, and Soundwave propelled Jazz inside.

"Is this your office? Doesn't look like you use it very much. What do you need in here?"

"Solitude."

Jazz looked at him, blank and unsuspecting. "Solitude? You could have that at home."

"Not mine. Yours. You will remain here for duration of shift."

It was not easy to watch his excited smile slip away, as comprehension dawned. "What?"

"You remain here," Soundwave repeated. "Alone. You will not see Autobot slaves."

"What- no. No! You can't do that, take me with you to the command room!"

Soundwave pressed a hand against Jazz's chest when he tried to push past him, pinning him against the dark console. "Jazz, slave. Will not give orders. You remain here."

"Why?"

"Behavior with Megatron."

"I won't do that again, I swear it, I'll stay quiet no matter what he says -"

"And solitude, promised punishment."

"For *what*?"

"Jazz, forgotten already? This promised so recently in exchange for your challenge."

Jazz looked horrified. "For that? You won't let me see my friends? No, that's out of proportion, that's not fair!"

"Soundwave, master. I will decide what is fair."

Without warning Jazz shoved at him, forcing Soundwave back a step, and lunged for the door. Soundwave had to grab his arms and wrestle him back against the console with more force than he



would have liked. "Let me go! Let me go, you can't do this, I need to see them! I have to check on them, I have to check on Bluestreak, he lives with that *monster*, and Percy..." Vents open wide in his panic, Jazz scrabbled and tore at Soundwave's arms. "I never get to see them, not any of them, I always had at least that until you took that from me! Let me go!"

"Negative. Punishment, necessary."

He obviously would not stay quietly. Soundwave unlocked one of his cuffs and relatched it around the leg of his desk. It hurt him more than he cared to admit when Jazz's vocalizer skipped and went scratchy with static. He did not want Jazz unhappy, but his impertinence had to be punished. For his own symbiotes, the worst punishment he could ever deal was to hamper their freedom. 'Confined to quarters' was the usual sentence for any misbehavior. For Jazz, this was obviously what cut him straight to the spark.

He stepped back, and Jazz thrashed his chain angrily. "If you leave me in here, I swear to Primus I will make you regret it."

"How?"

"I'll... sing *It's a Small World* at the top of my vocalizer!"

"Room, soundproof."

Jazz snarled. "Well, I'll think of something."

"Threats inappropriate, ineffective. Will return in .75 joor to feed."

"Frag you."

Soundwave did not react to that, and just looked at Jazz calmly. "Jazz, mine. Remember that." He turned and left. Jazz's anguished yell was cut off when the soundproofed door slammed shut.

---

"It's just one Autobot!" Megatron was bellowing at the comm screens when Soundwave entered command proper. "One - single - Autobot! We've obliterated and enslaved their entire army! How is it that that you cannot track down and capture just *one* of their soldiers, a soldier that has no access to steady shelter or fuel! Tell me *now*."

Motormaster hunched his shoulders and ducked his head, simmering with resentment and failure. "My lord Megatron, the Afghan lands are impossible to get through, the roads are -"

"I don't care about the roads," Megatron snapped. "He's just as much a vehicle as you are and he seems to manage just fine. Don't give me 'roads' as an excuse for your pathetic performance."

"There are so many places to hide. So many underground caves, and tunnels that go for miles. I follow every lead, respond to every human's call, but he always manages to disappear before I can get there. And he doesn't leave tracks on the bare rock."

"He has to recharge sometime. I suggest you find him while he's doing that, since he's apparently too much of a match for you otherwise." Megatron's fist slammed down on the comm switch,

terminating the connection and making Rumble jump.

"Incompetents," Megatron growled. "I am surrounded by incompetents."

Starscream huffed and crossed his arms; if Shockwave took any offense, it was impossible to know it. "My lord," he spoke up, "we still have the question of fuel distribution to discuss. Some mechs have been vocal that it isn't enough to power significant industry."

"It never stops, does it? Apparently saving the planet from death wasn't enough for some ingrates."

"I beg my lord's patience." Shockwave started tapping at buttons on the display fixture, calling up three-dimensional images of factories and their projected fuel needs. That's when Rumble noticed Soundwave, a flash of surprise crossing his face and the link between them.

*"Hey boss. What are you doing here?"*

*"Soundwave, head of Surveillance and Communications, ranking officer of Decepticon army. Command room, not appropriate location?"*

*"Right, sorry I asked."* He tipped back in his chair and craned his head, looking at the far corner of the lowest floor. The Autobot slaves were all huddled there together, now twice as miserable as when Soundwave first entered the room. Bluestreak had lit up when he first saw him, but when he realized Jazz wasn't there he'd looked absolutely crushed. *"Where's your shadow?"*

*"Office."*

*"Because...?"*

Soundwave didn't answer, just looked at him, and Rumble sank into the chair a little. *"Okay, none of my business, moving on."*

*"Rumble's presence, curious. Frenzy scheduled for current shift."*

Rumble shrugged. *"He's taking a break or somethin'. It's cool, it's fun to watch Megatron scream at Motormaster. He's a slagging jerk anyway."*

"Soundwave?" It was Shockwave that noticed him. Soundwave looked up, to see all three officers staring at him in surprise. "How... unexpected."

"Did I call for you?" Megatron looked confused. Soundwave bowed.

"Negative. Today, desire to work in command center."

Starscream's optics narrowed thoughtfully, but Megatron just shrugged. "Good. Since you're here, you can join us. I want your thoughts on Shockwave's proposals."

"Yes, Lord Megatron."

---

It did not, Soundwave reflected, take very long. A half-joor had barely gone by and Megatron and

Starscream were already screaming at each other. Shockwave had presented a detailed blueprint of energon distribution for the next centi-orn, heavily favoring factory repair and reactivation. It would mean shortening the supply for the general population, but he claimed it was a necessary investment for the future. Starscream shrilly accused him of only wanting to line his own accounts, that the wealthier neutrals who stood to gain would be paying Shockwave extensive kickbacks for the fuel, and that such obvious elitism went against everything the Decepticons had fought for in the first place. Shockwave countered that Starscream's plans to rebuild the science academy could hardly *not* be described as elitism, and he was only threatened by Shockwave's plans out of fear for his own fuel allotments. Both insisted to Megatron that their projects were vital investments for the future of the planet. Megatron snapped that he hadn't seen enough results from either to prove it.

That got Shockwave started on his usual spiel that he did not have enough resources for faster demolition in the unrepaired sectors. The Constructicons, even with their slave labor, couldn't do it fast enough. They needed more fuel, and precisely the heavy equipment that those particular factories would produce –

Starscream interrupted with a well rehearsed rant that drone-run factories and more buildings meant nothing without a suitably intelligent population to make use of them. Too much scientific effort had gone into warfare, these past hundreds of vorns, their planet was well behind the technological achievements they ought to be producing.

And so on. Soundwave listened patiently, spoke only when addressed, and kept his answers short and to the point. Nationbuilding was not of great interest to him, and he did not have much of an opinion to offer, but brevity was a quality Megatron valued (in other mechs.)

“Suggestion,” he finally said. “Evaluate worth of previous results, prorate fuel distribution accordingly.”

“Oh what am I supposed to do?” Starscream demanded, before Megatron could agree or disagree. “Pull brilliant inventions out of the thin air? I need equipment, resources, a suitable environment for experimentation! You can't ask me to produce progress to justify the fuel when I need the fuel for progress in the first place!”

“Who said anything about ‘asking’, Starscream?” Megatron said in a hard voice. “You *will* give me results or I *will* be looking elsewhere for mechs that can. And don't whine to me about resources. I gave you the Autobots' best scientist, use him already. Show me something of worth, like plans to rebuild a key to Vector Sigma, and then you will have all the fuel you could want.”

“Oh is that all, Vector Sigma?” Starscream tossed his head haughtily. “Will there be anything else, like a formula to convert cosmic rust into gold? If you're going to make such ambitious demands, then I'll need two scientists –“

“Say it and get knocked to the floor,” Megatron warned. Casually he flexed his fingers and curled them into a fist. “But please me, Starscream, and one of these days I'll allow you to... oh, I don't know. *See* him. Until then, worry more about me than your pitiful Autobot.”

Starscream's optics glittered, but he bowed his head in a gesture of mock subservience. “As you command, Lord Megatron.”

Soundwave stiffened slightly, and it had nothing to do with watching Megatron dangle Skyfire out in front of Starscream just like Jazz said he would. He'd just caught a very strong flash of alarm from Frenzy, which didn't worry him. What worried him was that the feeling promptly cut off, like a disconnected comm line, which meant Frenzy didn't want him to know about it. That, in Soundwave's long experience, usually meant trouble. He tapped Frenzy's side of the link with an

inquiring ping and got no response. He tried Rumble next, who'd felt it just as much as he did, and got the emotional equivalent of a shrug.

"Soundwave?"

He refocused his attention outward, to find Megatron looking at him. "What do you think?"

"... Affirmative."

"Unbelievable," Starscream muttered. "*Another* slave for the Constructicons when they already have four?"

"The medical bot hardly counts," Shockwave said coolly. "He has his own duties under Hook, and the two of them are quite busy enough. But Scrapper informs me that the addition of one other slave to his crew would be tremendously helpful in my proposed factory repair project."

"Which one does he want?" Megatron asked, ignoring Starscream's irritated 'hmpf'. Soundwave kept half his attention on the conversation and directed the other half toward Frenzy, again running up against a solid wall. What was he up to?

"Grapple and Hoist have some competence in the tasks Scrapper assigns them, and the small minibot with magnetic powers is proving very useful, but Scrapper needs a fourth slave with some real strength."

"Give him one of the dinobots," Starscream suggested snidely. "That should be more than enough steel power for him."

"I'll bring a dinobot to Cybertron when you agree to hold the other end of the leash," Megatron growled.

"My lord," Shockwave interposed, just when Starscream was about to retort. "I suggest minibot Brawn; his profile lists incredible lifting and throwing capacity."

"And when fuel production drops because this ever-so-strong minibot's been moved away from the energon wells?" Starscream pointed out.

"It will only be temporary, my lord, I am not asking for permanent reassignment. Only to borrow."

Megatron rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Ugly, obnoxious little creature," he murmured thoughtfully. "I remember him, alright. Those minibots are such a poor excuse for our race. Take him, Shockwave. You get one deca-orn, and then I want to see results. If I'm not happy with them, he goes back to Earth."

"You won't be disappointed, my lord." Shockwave bowed, and Starscream huffed.

"I'm tired of talking about all this," Megatron declared, and Soundwave recognized well enough the thin edge of irritation in his voice. "I need refreshment. Slave!"

He strode toward the steps, pedes clanging loud against the floor, and Soundwave could already hear Bluestreak scrambling to stand. Fortunate timing. Jazz's feeding time was near, but first he was going to take Rumble and go check on Frenzy. Just in *case*.

He took a step away from the table, only to be intercepted by Shockwave.

"Very fortuitous, your return today," Shockwave commented. "Your support for my plans saved me

much trouble, Director Soundwave. Thank you for your assistance.”

“Appreciation, unnecessary.” Soundwave inclined his head.

“I hope I can *always* count on your support in the future.”

Ah. That was not a discussion Soundwave wanted to have just now. Quickly he commed Rumble.

“Hey boss,” he called out, “can I steal ya for a breem? Got a question about some camera placement.”

“Apologies extended, Premier Shockwave.” Soundwave bowed his head again and made for the stairs, Rumble falling in beside him.

“Rumble, state Frenzy’s activity.”

“Don’t look at me, I dunno nothin’!”

Soundwave looked at him sharply, but mental probing found nothing. This only concerned him more. When the twins had a special mission in mind, one often left the other in the dark to provide plausible deniability. Wistfully Soundwave thought of his quiet loft, Jazz sitting across the hax set and waiting for him to play.

“Uh-oh,” Rumble muttered, dispelling that brief fantasy. They’d made it out of the command room and were almost out of the antechamber when Starscream practically threw himself in their path, blocking the hallway. “This can’t be good.”

“Soundwave! Out of the shadows at last. Spare a klik to chat?”

“Negative, surveillance task necessary.” Soundwave made to step around Starscream, only for Starscream to slap a hand against the wall.

“This won’t take long. I know you’re never taken in by my sweet, persuasive words, so I can just be direct with you. That up there, just now? Was really stupid.”

At his pedes, Rumble bristled up to twice his size. “Say that again, Screamer?”

“You’re a smart mech, and you’re very good at what you do. But you and I both know that you hate playing politics, and that’s exactly what Shockwave and I spend all the orn, every orn doing. I have enough trouble keeping that sychophantic freak off my turf and his claws off my fuel, without you wandering in to vote an accidental yes on his powermongering schemes.”

“Your rivalry, not my concern.”

Soundwave nudged not-so-gently against the wing blocking his way, and Starscream moved aside. But he wasn’t finished.

“You’re a fool if you think he doesn’t hate the both of us,” he hissed in a low voice, as Soundwave passed. “Maybe you even more than me. Megatron made you third-in-command while on Earth but to Shockwave *you’re* the interloper, you stole the rank that was his. At least he knows what I want and what I’ll do to get it. He doesn’t know if you’re a threat to his position or not, or what you’re up to while you lurk in your home out of sight. *And* Megatron likes you.” Starscream wrinkled his nasal plating into a sneer. “That’s something we both hate about you.”

Soundwave had paused, out of something like morbid fascination, to hear the poisononous whispers

falling from Starscream's lips. But he did not turn, and when Starscream had finished he kept walking as if he'd heard nothing at all. Rumble scurried to keep up, and Starscream did not follow.

"What the pit was all that about?" Rumble asked, as soon as they'd turned a corner. "You just voted yes for moving one slave from Earth to Cybertron! Who cares?"

"Shockwave," Soundwave admitted quietly. "And Starscream. Balance of power, very delicate."

Jazz would call it a game...

"Did any of that actually mean anything? Or was Starscream just blowing smoke?"

"Consideration will come later. Frenzy, priority now."

Again Soundwave scanned for his symbiote. His spark was not staying still but moving rather quickly around the command center... like he was running? Perhaps someone was chasing him? It took a few klicks but finally Soundwave managed to get a bead on his direction, and grimly closed the distance. Gulping, Rumble trotted along behind. When Frenzy came sprinting around the corner, optics pale with exertion and distress, his pedes made an unseemly screech against the floor when he slid to a stop.

"Gah, boss! You scared me! Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Confess activity."

"What activity, I didn't -"

"Frenzy. This cycle, not pleasant. Exacerbation not recommended. Confess activity."

"...right." Frenzy wilted slightly, and cleared a little static from his vocalizer. "Uh, the thing is - you remember how you told us not to try and prank Starscream whenever he torques us off?"

Soundwave smothered a tiny sigh. "Affirmative."

"Well... I didn't. Remember, that is. I wasn't gonna do much! Just hack into his office and coat his work console in red epoxy. It was only fair."

"Frenzy." Soundwave punctuated the word with unspoken anger, and Frenzy winced. "Retaliation against Starscream, ineffective, unproductive -"

"Boss." His small hands were twisting around themselves, and thick dread spread from him to Soundwave and Rumble. "It gets worse. It's Jazz."

Soundwave stiffened, routine irritation dialing up to true anxiety. "Jazz, involved how?"

"I dunno where he came from! I was just gettin' started when someone said 'boo!' and I jumped and turned around and he was dropping out of the ceiling beams like it was just nothin'. He didn't even have his chains on."

"Jazz got out?" Rumble yelped, then hastily clapped a hand over his own mouth, glancing around to make sure the hallway was still empty. He switched to comm just to be safe. *"Here? In Decepticon Command?"*

*"He said you'd locked him in your office but that he was bored and looking for something to do and that he saw me hack into Screamer's office so he figured he'd just tag along and maybe talk to me he said he thought it was time we had a nice long conversation -"*

*"Why didn't you zap his collar?" Rumble wailed, before Soundwave could ask. "That's what it's there for, you glitch!"*

*"I threatened to! Then he smiled and said that'd leave him unconscious on the floor of Starscream's office and that'd be all kinds of trouble for Soundwave, which I think is pretty much right, so I tried to convince him to go back to yours and that's when he started making lots of noise, banging on the walls and I really didn't want anyone outside to catch me- I mean us, in there so I told him to shut up and he said he would if we could just talk -"*

*"Forget what he said! Where did he go, where is he now?"*

*"I don't know," Frenzy answered, in a small voice. "I kept up with him for maybe a klik, and then he just disappeared. I'm sorry, Soundwave."*

Soundwave didn't waste time replying. Instead he located and accessed the tracking signal on Jazz's slave collar, honing in on his location at a furious speed. He had it in under a nanoklik. Jazz was already out of the building, which at least meant he wouldn't be bumping into Megatron, and moving through the Iacon streets. He wasn't going very fast, and must have been keeping to the shadows to stay out of sight. How an unaccompanied slave could just stroll through the city without being spotted was a mystery, but Soundwave had no doubt in his mind that Jazz could do it. What he did know was that Jazz was not trying to escape. He was too smart to not know Soundwave could track him effortlessly, and moving too slow to get very far. This was just another of his games, payback for getting locked in the office. When Soundwave found him, he would laugh mockingly, say 'I told you so!', and give himself another point.

*"Rumble, return to command room, assume any communication responsibilities. Frenzy, come with me. Jazz entering unrepaiored sectors."*

*"Wait, Soundwave." Frenzy looked the picture of guilty misery, shoulders hunched and optics on the ground. "There's more. You have to know what we talked about."*

There was that dread again. Rumble tensed. *"What do you mean, what you talked about? Who **cares** what you talked about?"*

*"I'm sorry, Soundwave," Frenzy repeated. "I was so nervous that we were going to get caught, but he wouldn't leave. He just kept pressing me and pressing me, to talk, to have a conversation, said he was bound to find out eventually that you couldn't hide the truth forever, and I just happened to be his first good chance so I might as well tell him..."*

A chill spread outward from Soundwave's spark, enveloping more of his body with every word out of Frenzy's comm. Rumble was a block of horrified next to him.

*"What," he whispered, "did you tell him? What did you say?"*

*"I'm so sorry, boss." Frenzy was starting to shake. "I told him everything. Once I started I just couldn't stop. He knows all of it."*

---

It was really that stupid bot's fault. If he hadn't died in the war, none of this would have happened. But he did, and it did all happen, and you have no idea what you walked into that night you came home with Soundwave, do you? The House of Failure and Death, that's what. Truth is, you're not

the first Autobot to come under our roof. You're the fifth.

What, weren't you wondering why Soundwave didn't already have a hot little slave of his own to keep the berth warm? It's not as if he couldn't, you know. Megatron offered him first pick, when he started handing out the Autobots; Soundwave's always been Megatron's favorite. But Soundwave said no, he couldn't accept that. He was thinking about that stupid bot Blaster, how he didn't make it out of that nasty space battle just off Earth's moon. You know about that, right? The seekers smashed up that Autobot team good and hard, and Blaster went to the Well - but his cassettes didn't. They got rounded up and brought in as prisoners, and now they were on their own. Soundwave told Megatron that he'd take them in. Somethin' about 'responsibility' or some slag, I dunno. Me and Rumble didn't care. We figured it'd be fun, that we could pick on them and make them do whatever we wanted.

It wasn't nothin' like that, though. I remember when Soundwave brought the four of them home. They didn't look at any of us, didn't talk, didn't even look up when I kicked 'em. What? I was tryin' to see if they were even awake. Soundwave said they were in shock, that they needed time to cope with Blaster's deactivation. He said to leave them alone and not tease them. So me and Rumble waited 'til he wasn't around before we did.

What? Jeez, Autobots and your fragging morals. Don't look at me like that - we figured we were doing them a favor! We thought getting picked on might wake 'em up a little, make 'em want to fight. They were just huddled up in the corner, hugging one another all the orn. It was so depressing. So we tried to make 'em mad, but we came up empty. They just... didn't hear us. Didn't see us. Their bodies were here, but their minds were still back with Blaster.

Soundwave knew that. Every chance he could he'd pick them up, one after another, and try to coax them into a connection. He was the only one they ever responded to, I guess because he reminded them of Blaster. They would nuzzle up to his armor, clutch at him and whimper. But he isn't Blaster, and no matter how hard he tried - and Primus knows he was trying - he couldn't form a symbiosis. They refused to link up. Ugly things happened when he tried to force it. Every one of 'em either collapsed or fritzed. I remember how Ramhorn screamed like he'd been skewered or somethin'. Me and Rumble got out quick. Soundwave never tried anything like that again, but he still kept on picking them up and holding them, rocking them to recharge.

I knew it was upsetting him; we all did, we could feel it. But we didn't know how much worse it was going to get. Some deca-orns went by, we'd all gotten used to them being around, and figured they'd just keep on being lifeless drones forever. No such luck. Things started going wrong on the inside - systems wouldn't reset properly, energy levels dropping, defragmentation cycles coming too infrequently. Soundwave started calling in Hook to make a house call every day. Did his best, ya know, that 'con can't stand not being able to fix something, but nothing he tried would work. They'd been with Blaster too long to get cut off like this; if they couldn't synchronize with their master then their bodies paid the price. Their very sparks couldn't maintain a steady rhythm, flickering like a fire on its way out. And there ain't no medic that can fix that.

Fragging Soundwave wouldn't give up, of course. We all had to spoonfeed them their energon, tiny amounts several times through the day, and make them walk around the loft to keep their fluids circulating, and all kinds of ridiculous mech-nursing. I hated it, but didn't complain. None of us did. Gloating at their misery was one thing, but this was fucking creepy. Watching them, I knew we were all thinking the same thing: this could have been us, if it was Soundwave instead of Blaster that kicked it. That could have been me and Rumble, dying by the breem without even a struggle, and that was scary as the pit.



Rewind was the first to go. I think we all knew at that point it was going to happen, but it didn't make it any easier when it did. His brothers felt his death, even though Soundwave didn't let them see the body, and after that they just got worse. They couldn't take anymore energon; it all got rejected. No more walking, no more movement at all. Soundwave would hold them in his arms, and they didn't even react. Next was Ramhorn, then Eject. Soundwave never said a word about it, but the next day there'd be one less Autobot in the loft, and that much more chill in the air. I remember the last time I saw Steeljaw, lying on Soundwave's lap while Soundwave pet him. Ravage was curled up in the corner, not even jealous, just... sad. And waiting. I don't think Steeljaw could even feel Soundwave's hand. And the next day, he was gone too.

So believe me when I tell you it was rough. And we were all just getting over it - and when I say we, I mean *Soundwave* was finally getting over it - when he went out for a drink and brought you home instead. Yeah, we're a little touchy about the subject of Autobot slaves in this house, and can you blame us? We don't want to see him get hurt anymore, not ever. He didn't deserve what happened. So if you ever even think about hurting him, I'll - hey, what are you doing? Damn it, how do you *do* that? Get back down here! Come back! Hey!"

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## on grief

Darkness and silence shrouded the unrepaired sectors. They were still too far from the power grid to have any light but starlight, too far for any noise but the occasional skittering glitchmouse. Someday soon, if Shockwave's plans held true, the Constructicons would demolish and rebuild all this land, and inch by inch Cybertron would regain its former glory. For now, though, it was a dead place. Grime covered every surface. The planet did not have enough atmosphere for any wind, which meant the layers of soot that plumed under Soundwave's pedes were probably residue from some long-ago battle. The war still lurked here, shadows thick with death and destruction.

Soundwave did not hurry. Jazz had stopped moving, according to the signal, and was not much farther away. He was, in fact, not too far from the place Ravage had tried to hide, and Soundwave had forced Jazz to watch as he subdued his wayward possession. It seemed a very long time ago now. Then, he'd been prepared for what would happen, because he knew Ravage like he knew his own spark. Now, he didn't know at all.

He got his answer soon enough. He'd just rounded a pile of twisted junk when something came flying through the darkness and hit him square on the shoulder. An old rusted pipe clattered to the ground, and Soundwave looked up just in time to see a flash of white armor disappearing behind the second story struts of a building.

"Jazz -"

"Go away!"

"Jazz, come -"

A wordless snarl of rage and another piece of scrap cut him off, and it would have hit him in the head if he hadn't ducked in time. Soundwave vented some air. Jazz had no intention of making this easy.

He kicked on his thrusters and elevated himself to the second floor of this place, a bombed-out shell that had little left beside the struts and beams that were its skeleton. Jazz had already vanished by the time he did, and Soundwave scanned the darkness uncertainly.

"Jazz, come forward."

"I said go away! Get the hell away from me, Decepticon!" Two chunks of debris hurtled at him from above - Jazz had already made it up to the third floor, and by the time Soundwave spotted him, he was swinging up underneath a pole to land on the fourth. Again Soundwave activated his thrusters, and roared upwards in time to face Jazz just as he'd landed. Jazz backed up quickly, engine growls dark and angry.

*"Murderer."*

Soundwave's spark twisted. "Term, inaccurate."

"The hell it is. You killed them, all four of them, they were alive when they went to your home and now they're *dead*. What, you weren't satisfied killing us off in the war? Did you think we hadn't lost enough? What did you *do* to them?"

"Nothing. Only actions: shelter, fuel, comf- "

"Liar!" Jazz flung another piece of scrap that hit him square on the head, and it hurt. "You did something! They died, they all died!"

Every word stabbed like shards of ice under his armor. "Outcome, not desired. Every effort made to preserve lives."

"*Oh*. You didn't *want* them to die. Well I guess that makes them less *dead*."

"Incident, very... frustrating." For megacycles Soundwave hadn't let himself or anyone in his house speak about it. Now he found himself struggling to find the right words. "Results, painful."

"Don't you dare talk to me about pain. We lost everything we ever had - our friends, our freedom, our future! Are you really going to stand there and expect pity from me? So you tried to keep them alive. What do you want, a medal? A *hug*? It's your fucking fault that Blaster died in the first place! Maybe you didn't pull the trigger but you sliced the signal that gave away their location to the seekers, you pushed the button that ended his life. If you didn't want his cassettes to die then maybe you should have thought about that first!"

Jazz was stepping a wide arc around Soundwave, on what flooring there was, fists clenched tight and visor blazing with anger. Soundwave had never seen Jazz like this, unhidden behind fake smiles and glib comments, his emotions raw and wild. He was unbearably beautiful to look at.

"You won, Soundwave. You got to live, all your symbiotes got to live, you're the right-hand mech to Cybertron's just-fuck-us-all-now emperor. Blaster got nothing. He was my *friend*." Now Soundwave heard the pain in his voice, layered underneath his hot anger. "He was my friend and he loved parties and music and his little pack of bots, but he had to die out there in space. And now I know that his cassettes didn't even get the favor of that quick death. It's not fair. It's *not fair*."

He choked and his vocalizer buzzed with static; automatically Soundwave moved forward. "Jazz -"

"Don't touch me!" Jazz jumped back from his outstretched hand like it was fire. "Don't touch me with those hands, they all died in those hands! You kill Autobots without even trying!"

Soundwave froze, his spark chamber so brittle that he thought it might crack if he moved another inch. Jazz backed into the corner beam, hands shaking, light flickering behind in his visor in some new pattern that Soundwave hadn't yet seen. A low, dark keening of grief welled up out of his vocalizer, and he sank to the floor as if he'd used up all his strength.

"I thought... maybe they'd escaped," he whispered. "For all this time I've been listening, watching, figuring out where we all ended up, accounting for all the Autobots. Nobody ever said a word about the cassetibots. I hoped that you 'cons just overlooked 'em, forgot they were there, and they got away. Either that, or they died with Blaster in battle. This was worse. They were so small..."

Again he keened, louder, and buried his face in his hands. Vents sputtered, flapping open and shut, his engine skipped and whined, and endless static crackled within his vocalizer. Soundwave did not move. Silent and still, he stood and watched over Jazz while he wept.

It took a long time. Jazz missed a second feeding time, then a third, then a fourth. The active cycle ended, and the 'night' one began. Still Jazz cried. Soundwave was patient, and unwilling to force Jazz to move. Soon enough, he'd exhaust himself. His strained systems would run down, and he would fall into recharge, and then Soundwave would pick him up and carry him home. All that would happen in a little while.

But for now Soundwave only listened, to the cries that pulled at his own grieving spark, and how they were swallowed up in the dead silence of the ruins of war.

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Booting up felt all wrong. Soundwave's systems queued up as always, spinning out data, and one after another his carrier program listed the proximity of his symbiotes. All of them were near enough that they must be in the loft, even Laserbeak and Buzzsaw. They had not gone out on their nocturnal patrol. Soundwave did not have to see any of them to know what he would find when he did: the five of them all piled together in recharge, seeking comfort in closeness. In any other situation they would have been piled on top of him, but Frenzy probably couldn't bring himself to even look at Soundwave just then, and his siblings would have opted to stay with him. They were all asleep now, but healthy and safe, their five connections a steady and soothing hum in his mind.

Something still felt wrong, as if the program had missed a sixth symbiote. Soundwave online'd his optical relay, and found Jazz was not on the far side of the berth. He wasn't *anywhere* on the berth, or in the room. There was no low thrumming of his systems, no sounds of his soft ventilations. It was too quiet. Alone on the berth, Soundwave felt oddly cold.

He got up and left the room, worry kindling inside him. Jazz had seemed so deep in recharge, when Soundwave finally carried him home, that he'd been sure he'd sleep for joors. Evidently that wasn't the case, and Jazz had already proven well enough that chains couldn't hold him, let alone locked doors. It wasn't yet morning, and with everyone asleep there was nothing to keep him here. Maybe he'd run away again. They'd been lucky before, but if Jazz got caught alone without his Decepticon master, horrible trouble would follow. City lawkeepers would drag him to the command center and to Megatron, who would promptly summon Soundwave and ask him, in front of everyone else, why he couldn't control his own property. And Soundwave would not have a good answer.

It was an unfounded worry, though. Jazz was standing by the window, silent and still as the star-freckled Iaconian landscape. His vocalizer wasn't crackling with static anymore, but with his arms wrapped around himself like that he still looked very small and fragile. When the door to Soundwave's room slid open, he flinched and backed away from the meager light, almost vanishing into the darkness. The power grid went down for the middle joors of the night cycle, to conserve energy, and Soundwave could see little of Jazz but for his dimly glowing visor. Options popped up, offering to switch into night vision, but Soundwave declined. What good would seeing him do, when Soundwave had no idea what to say?

"Jazz... hungry?"

Something like a cross between a huff and a sigh escaped Jazz's vents. "Really? That's what you want to lead with?"

"This conversation, high predicted difficulty," Soundwave admitted. "Words, not easy to choose."

"Most Decepticons, having chased down a runaway slave through the ruins, and then been attacked by that slave throwing things, would go with 'I'm gonna hurt you.'" Jazz was moving across the room, further away from the scant starlight, but he didn't take his gaze off Soundwave for an astrosec. "But I'm guessing you won't go that route."

"Affirmative. Jazz's anger, understood. Revelation unpleasant."

"To say the least."

"Method of discovery, not preferred."

"And how did you think I would find out? Sit patiently by for a vorn or two before you spilled the whole sordid story? You must know by now that I'm not the sit-and-wait-patiently type. Of course I was going to discover your secret; I warned you that I would. I don't think it was the method that's got you troubled. You never wanted me to know. Did you think you could just sweep all four bodies under the rug and pretend it never happened?"

"Negative, incorrect!"

"Shh." Jazz tapped a finger against his lips, and nodded toward the couch. "You'll wake the kids."

The five of them were in a heap at the end of the couch, tangled up in their recharge just like Soundwave knew they would be. Ravage had curled himself around the twins, tail occasionally flicking, while Laserbeak and Buzzsaw had nestled themselves in wherever they could fit.

Soundwave did not want them awake just now, and he put a tight lock on his link to ensure that none of his unhappy emotions could disturb them.

"Incorrect," he repeated more quietly, struggling to maintain his traditional impassivity. "Could never pretend. Every orn, every nanoklik, incident recalled. Silence on subject kept because memory painful."

"There you go with that word again. Why don't we save *painful* for the little mechs that died in this apartment, because I think they had the harder time of it."

"Frustrating," Soundwave tried. The pain that had ripped through his sparkchamber every time another cassetibot died had been indescribable, but he did not want to argue with Jazz about it. Only another host carrier model would have understood. "Every effort made to preserve lives. End result, not desired."

"Every effort..." Jazz echoed thoughtfully. Again he glanced at the symbiotes on the couch. "I wish I couldn't picture that, but you're the one that was eager to show off how you discipline Ravage.

What you do, to make sure your possessions know where they belong. What did you do to them, when they woke up and cried for Blaster? Did you beat them?"

"*Never*." Soundwave advanced a couple steps but Jazz backed away, a wraith in the darkness.

"Physical violence, never initiated. Cassetibots, weak and ill. Contact, only gentle: holding, rocking, petting. Such contact intrinsic to cassette culture, necessary for comfort."

"Did you rape them?"

Silence dropped, hard and cold, into the loft. Soundwave froze, and he knew Jazz had seen it. How to explain? Even another carrier model would not understand, and Jazz was an outsider to their way of life.

"Symbiosis between models, very sacred," he started, groping to find the right words. "Permanent. Consensual, always. Mutual desire necessary. This fact known, but reasons for it not known. Previous acquisitions, all willing symbiotes."

And it was true. He'd had to keep Ravage a prisoner for close to a vorn before he finally submitted to Soundwave's authority, but the act of symbiosis had been strictly consensual. At some deep level

in his programming that could only be called instinct, Soundwave knew that it must be that way. He'd never known why.

"Symbiosis... desirable for cassette model. Gives strength, speed, better health. But, also liability. Sudden death of host model leaves cassette too weak, unable to survive. Only alternative, form new symbiosis. This act, rational and logical. But Blaster's symbiotes... refused."

He did not have the words to describe the fear and dread clamping down on his spark, watching their life force dwindle away. He had held little Rewind in his arms, could feel his flickering sparkbeat, and the tremble in his hand as he clutched at Soundwave's armor. "*Blaster?*" he'd whispered hopefully, just like he did every night, and Soundwave would answer, "*Negative. Blaster is gone. Rewind, now Soundwave's. Prepare for symbiotic uplink.*"

Never did he or any of his brothers obey that order. They curled up tight and ignored his petting, forcing themselves back into recharge. And all the while, they were dying.

"Situation, desperate," Soundwave finally managed. "Forced symbiosis, only apparent option. Attempted only once. Pain inflicted on cassettes, not foreseen. Never tried again. Resumed attempts to persuade Autobots, but failed. Answer to your question: affirmative."

Jazz hadn't been standing still. When did he move so much closer to the couch, without Soundwave seeing? Uneasily, he noticed Jazz was only a step away from his symbiotes. But he wasn't looking at them, he was looking at Soundwave.

"You will, I think, burn in the pit, Soundwave." His vents exhaled a long, slow sigh. "That gives me a little comfort, at least. You did a horrible thing, and I should hate you for it. Any Autobot would. But..."

He hesitated, and Soundwave mentally replayed the last few words. *Should hate?*

Laserbeak shifted in her sleep, a soft whistle escaping her beak as she did so. Jazz's attention immediately switched to her, and in smooth silence he knelt by the couch. Every strut in Soundwave's body tensed, an automatic reaction to any threat against his symbiotes. He'd have never thought Jazz would be stupid enough to hurt one of them, but his state of mind was not to be trusted right now.

"They really are so small, aren't they? No matter what kind of an edge they get by linking up to a bigger mech, they're just too little. They weren't meant to live on a planet that's busy ripping itself apart with war. There are so many ways they can get hurt."

Jazz lifted a hand, and Soundwave nearly flew at him. But all he did was lay it gently aside Laserbeak's head, stroking lightly. It didn't wake her up, but she sighed happily in her sleep.

"They say," he murmured, "that our species doesn't dream like the humans do. I'm not so sure. When I online'd in the middle of the night, it was right into the middle of an archived memory file playback. I'd forgotten all about that night, but now I remember. I remember every word."

"There'd been a fight that day. We were on Earth. We held our ground and in the end you guys retreated, but not without a pretty pile of energon. Something you did with the frequencies scrambled Blaster's security locks, and it set us back. He was royally frayed off about it, and that night I kept him company in the comms room while he got stone drunk. He talked about you a lot, mostly about how he hated you."

He didn't look up, still gliding his palm over Laserbeak's long neck. Soundwave didn't move.

"For a bot as mellow as B, he really did not dig you. And that night, I got to hear most of his six thousand reasons why. But then, at some point when he was seriously deep in the cubes and past any hope of remembering the conversation, he said something else. He said that he and you might go on 'til the end of time hating one another, always looking to take the other down, never rest until the other one's dead, etc. But that, in some way, you also understood each other. More than anyone else ever could. He was looking at Steeljaw when he said that."

At last he looked at Soundwave again. "What if it had been the other way around? If he'd been the one to live, and take in your symbiotes? Do you think he would have tried that thing you did?"

A possessive flare of anger surged up in Soundwave at the thought of it, but logic prevailed.

"Unknown. Possibly. As stated, few alternatives."

"Right. Well, I don't know either, and I'm a vehicle model. I'm not a part of your world, don't know how it works. But I know this: he would have done his Primus-damned best to give a home to your brats no matter what. He would have fed them, held them, petted them like you say has to be done. Can't say they would have survived either, but he would have moved the stars trying. Because you two understood each other."

He held Soundwave's gaze, expression unreadable, for a brief moment before returning his attention to Laserbeak. Lightly he tickled her in her favorite spot, under her beak.

"I know you didn't want them to die. I didn't mean that, before, about you killing them. We're talking about you, after all; I know that you must have done everything you could to save them. Blaster wouldn't hate you either."

"Either," Soundwave repeated, and took a step closer. Jazz flinched.

"Don't. I'm not ready to be near you just yet."

"Jazz -"

"I mean it. Leave me alone. Besides, you have to look after your pack."

"Cassettes, recharging."

He took one more step and light flashed across Jazz's visor, sharp and defensive. "Not anymore."

Jazz braced his hands against the couch and shoved hard. Five minds burst into startled consciousness all at once, automatically seeking out his presence. He had to relax the lock on his link, without allowing any of his exasperation or upset to get through. Frenzy whimpered his name. Meanwhile, Jazz disappeared into his berth room and slammed the door shut behind him.

---

Warm solvent splashed against the floor of the washracks, draining through tiny holes and clouding the room with steam. It was hot, and crowded with too many bodies, but Soundwave knew it comforted his symbiotes to cluster together like this. Even Ravage, who generally had to be dragged, claws splayed, into a bath, showed no inclination to leave. Every now and then he shook

his head, scattering droplets all over Rumble, but he didn't try to move out of the spray zone. Rumble didn't seem to notice or care, sitting on Soundwave's pede and listlessly kicking at the puffs of soap foam that fell from above.

"So like, now what?"

Soundwave didn't respond, still carefully massaging soap into Frenzy, who sat cradled in his hands like a lump of misery defined. Rumble shifted restlessly, irritated at being ignored.

"I mean, it's kind of all gone to the pit now, hasn't it? Because glitch-head up there can't keep his mouth shut, everything's ruined."

"Shut up, you weren't there."

"Now Jazz hates Soundwave again," Rumble continued, as if his brother hadn't spoken. "Which puts Soundwave back to bein' dark and gloomy, and we're right back to where we were before. This place was just startin' to be fun again."

*"Frenzy, not at fault," Buzzsaw interjected. "Autobot, clearly wrong. Manipulated information from Frenzy; information not his business. Autobot, slave. Deserves punishment."*

Ravage growled, and unhelpfully supplied an image of himself ripping off most of Jazz's limbs. Everyone ignored him.

*"Disagree,"* Laserbeak piped up. Like her brother, every now and then she tipped forward from Soundwave's shoulder to spread her wings, catching a fresh spray of solvent before shaking off excess liquid. *"Information his business. Autobots, his friends."*

"So what?" grouched Rumble. "He was better off thinking they'd escaped. It made him happier. It would have been better for all of us if he never found out."

*"Never, not a possibility."*

"Yeah," Frenzy put in emphatically. "You weren't there, you don't know what it was like. He knew something was up, he's been watching and waiting all this time for his chance to pounce. He was gonna find out no matter what."

*"Willful slave,"* Buzzsaw muttered. *"Acted above himself."*

*"Perhaps,"* Laserbeak said thoughtfully. *"But perhaps, his initiative necessary. Autobot, now part of this household. Needed truth."*

Ravage snarled, furious denial rocketing through their link. Buzzsaw bobbed his head in agreement. *"Autobot, not one of us."*

*"Oh? Recharges here. Refuels here. Follows Master all the orn. At Master's side more than all of us. Should he not know his master? Not know what Master did?"*

"Who cares what he should know or shouldn't know?" Rumble wailed in exasperation. "It's too late now. Point is he does, and everything's gone to the pit because of it."

Laserbeak canted her head to one side. *"Rumble, fond of Jazz?"*

"Well, ya know." He cleared and rebooted his vocalizer, staring determinedly at one corner of the washracks. "Jazz... isn't completely hideous to have around. He's kinda fun. And he cheers up the



boss. But not anymore.”

Frenzy’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah. Not anymore. I’m so sorry, Soundwave, I really am, I didn’t want -”

Laserbeak clucked a couple of times, her expression of reassurance. “*You two, argue often. Anger, not forever.*”

“Well, duh, that’s different.”

“*Jazz’s anger, unsustainable,*” Laserbeak predicted confidently. “*Primary cause, shock. Cannot hate Master for this.*”

“What makes you so sure?”

“*Cassettibots, friends of Jazz. Master tried to save them.*”

Silence. Only the steady hiss of the shower could be heard as everyone there did a full vent cycle. For deca-orns, none of them had talked about it. Nobody had dared even say that word, as if to pronounce it would raise the ghosts themselves. Not that their home wasn’t already haunted. All of them lived under the pall of death, whispering around the terrible secret and trying not to remember what those little bots had looked like. How they had sounded, as they struggled just to cycle in fresh air.

“Uh... okay.” Frenzy’s voice was very small against the heavy silence, but at least he was trying. He rebooted his vocalizer and raised the volume a bit. “Maybe. But, you know, they die- they didn’t make it. Even if Boss tried, they still didn’t. Jazz looked kinda scary when he ran out on me. You can see why he’d be mad.” He winced at some private comm from Rumble. “What? It’s true. Laserbeak thinks Jazz’ll get over it, but I’m not so sure. What do you think?”

Rumble shrugged uncomfortably. “If I met anyone that I thought was responsible for hurting any of you punks... I’d never stop hating them.”

Laserbeak snapped her beak at him. “*Perhaps Autobot, more reasonable than you.*”

“*Autobot’s feelings irrelevant,*” Buzzsaw said sourly. “*Only slave.*”

*Remove slave/solve problem,* Ravage suggested.

“Shut up, Ravage,” both twins muttered in unison. “Jazz stays.”

“If he’ll keep bein’ fun.”

“If he’s not hating Soundwave.”

“*Will not,*” Laserbeak insisted.

“Don’t know ‘bout that, Laserbeak.”

“What do you think, Boss?”

“Soundwave?”

“*Master?*”

“*Don’t care,*” Buzzsaw grouched, and tucked his beak under his wing.

Silence, again. Four of five little faces had turned up to him: curious, confused, hurt, scared. Soundwave watched the solvent splashing down on Frenzy, rinsing him clean, but in his mind it was Jazz he was seeing. A ghost in the darkness, whispering a story about another ghost, saying things like *would have tried his Primus-damned best and wouldn't hate you either*.

"Unsure," he said at last. "Indicators of acceptance present. Perhaps time only needed."

"That's what you said last time," Frenzy said quietly. Soundwave barely controlled his emotional wince, but Laserbeak guessed it anyway. She nibbled at the edge of his jaw.

*"Will not happen again. Jazz, healthy. Alive. Yours forever. Anxiety misplaced."*

Soundwave let a small sigh escape him. "Laserbeak, often too optimistic."

*"Someone must be."*

True, he supposed, enough.

"All casseticons, out. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, overdue for nocturnal patrol. Gather surveillance, will draft delayed report for Megatron with apology. Rumble and Frenzy, report to Decepticon command. Ravage, continue search for sedition in Iacon's fringe developments." He switched off the flow, and hot air blasted out of the drying vents. "Everyone out, now."

"Whatcha gonna do, boss?"

"If necessary, begin again. Jazz, mine."

---

It took most of a breem, but finally Soundwave managed to shoo his hovering symbionts out of the loft. He didn't know what to expect when he confronted Jazz again, but having an audience wouldn't help, and besides, Iacon was waking up outside and there were duties that could not be ignored. They had their tasks to attend to, and he had his slave. His upset, angry, fearful slave that was in desperate need of a bath and refueling. Soundwave performed a full vent cycle and pushed the button that would open his berthroom door.

The lights were completely down. He raised them to partial illumination, rather than adjust his own visor settings, but Jazz was nowhere to be seen. Anxiety jumped up his intakes, which he tried to quell, but even when he'd entered the room and scanned it from wall to wall, there was no sign of his slave.

Soundwave shuttered and rebooted his visor, trying to remain calm. He turned around, and scanned the common room as well. Nothing. Maybe this time Jazz really did run away. Maybe this time, he would run a little faster, and a little farther. Maybe –

"Behind you," he murmured, and Soundwave came the closest he had to jumping in several hundred vorns. He managed to restrain himself and keep from whirling around, even if he was a shade too quick to turn. Jazz was just an inch away, grim smirk flickering briefly across his expression. "Told you before, Soundwave, too slow. You should be more careful, or I really will get lost."

Soundwave latched a powerful grip around Jazz's wrist. "Do not repeat that."

“Can’t hardly help myself, master. You have such big shoulders. Behind them is the best place to hide. For all you Decepticons enjoy stabbing each other in the back, you don’t look back there very often.”

“Come.” Without letting go, Soundwave propelled Jazz into the still-damp washracks. Of all of them, Jazz was the one that needed this the most; his armor was grimy and gray with the soot of the ruins. Jazz didn’t resist, but his vents expelled a quiet sigh when hot solvent gushed down over him.

“Ease of escape from office yesterday, unsettling.” Soundwave touched the foam brush very gently against Jazz’s chest; Jazz grimaced and slipped backward, out from under its bristles. “Restraints, ineffective.”

“In every way,” Jazz assured him. He didn’t fight it when Soundwave held him still with one hand, but he still leaned his weight back from the brush, holding himself distant. “Oh, Soundwave. Let’s face the facts, shall we? Special Ops. Can’t switch off that training just because the war’s done. Your little chains don’t hold me, your dronesplay locks on the front door don’t hold me. The only thing keeping me at your side is this.” With a fair amount of disgust he flicked the collar around his neck.

“And if I had the medical know-how to yank its wires out of my nervous system, believe me, I’d have been gone a long time ago. As it stands, you could wake up every morning and have to hunt me down to a different part of Iacon.”

Soundwave thought about how Jazz always managed to be on the far side of the berth when he woke, and how much worse the alternative could have been. “Reasons you did not?”

Under his hand, Jazz gave a marginal shrug. “Wouldn’t amount to much. Didn’t feel like it.”

“Restraint, appreciated.”

“Oh, a Decepticon saying *thank you*. I’ll be damned. Next you’ll be telling me you care whether Autobots live or die.”

Soundwave couldn’t help it; he shoved Jazz just a little harder than necessary to turn him around.

“Ah, okay, I deserved that. Smokey says I’ve got strange coping methods.” Without needing to be told, Jazz stretched his arms up and crossed his wrists over his head. “But I think you do too. So you shouldn’t judge. And that brings me, again, to the million-credit question: what am I doing here?”

Jazz leaned back, unexpectedly, tilting his head back far enough to look at Soundwave upside down. “Am I some kind of second chance to you? Or rather, fifth chance? Are you trying to prove to yourself that you can keep an Autobot in your cage and not kill it?”

Soundwave pushed Jazz’s head forward, until he was looking at the wall again. “I suppose there’s always the off-chance that this is some kind of redemption. Skywarp was going to starve me to death, we all know that, and maybe you felt the urge to save my life as compensation for what you did. Noble. But... somehow, I just can’t make myself believe that you care that much about what the Autobots think of you.”

He turned around underneath Soundwave’s hands, the glow in his visor focused with unnerving intensity on Soundwave’s face. “No, I think I was closest with my court jester guess. You’re so miserable you can barely ventilate, and you know you made your pack of pests miserable too. And what happened to the cassetibots scared them – and you – out of your damn minds. This apartment

is a graveyard. You just wanted someone in it that wasn't afraid to smile."

Jazz clucked his glossa disdainfully. "What kind of fucked up world is this, where the victor in a war needs the loser to cheer him up? How do you think that makes me feel, serving as your distraction so you don't have to think about what you did to my friends?"

Soundwave had no answer to that, so he fell back on his usual practice of saying nothing at all. He knelt and swept the brush lower, obscuring Jazz's filthy armor under a thick layer of foam.

"I'm not one of them, you know."

Soundwave looked up, and Jazz met his gaze steadily. "Jazz's model type, already known."

"I'm not so sure. The way you fuss over me in the bath, the handfeeding, the constant petting... you try to treat me like I'm a symbiont waiting for a master, and I'm not. I'm a *vehicle*. Give me the unending road, and the exhilaration of shifting into top gear – it's all I'll ever want. Nothing you do can change that."

"Still, Jazz mine."

"You are setting yourself up for your own sparkbreak, Soundwave." When would he ever learn how to predict Jazz? His slave bent forward, using his temporary advantage of height to rest his forehead lightly against Soundwave's. "I'll always be out of your reach, never want the things you want me to want. Throw as many movie nights at me as you like, I still won't be a part of your family. I'm still an Autobot, dreaming of my freedom."

"Jazz, slave. Mine forever."

Soundwave grasped Jazz's chin in his hands, holding him a little distant so he could stare him down properly as he stood.

"That what you thought about the other four?"

Soundwave winced, and because he tightened his grip a little too hard, so did Jazz. "That subject, not welcome."

"Oh, really?"

Damn Jazz anyway, standing there so small and helpless before him, and still refusing to be intimidated.

"Your turn." He pushed the brush against Jazz's chest. "Wash me."

"Of course, master." Idly Jazz flicked his thumb against the bristles, spattering foam against the Decepticon sigil on his chest. "Only too happy to."

"Suggestion: avoid that topic in future."

"What, you mean the cassetibots?" Jazz seemed to positively relish the way Soundwave flinched, and slapped the brush against his chest glass with extra force. "Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"Accusations, unwanted and unnecessary."

"I told you, Soundwave, I know you didn't kill them." Jazz paused mid-stroke, tilting his head thoughtfully. "I guess the question is: do you know it?"

“Silence on this matter, preferred.”

“Sure. Because that’s been working out so well for you and yours.”

Now it was Soundwave’s turn to quietly sigh. “Jazz.”

“My love?”

“No more talking.”

“If you say so. But there is just one, *really* important thing I need to tell you. You should listen to this.” Jazz curled his fingertips against the edges of Soundwave’s armor to pull himself up on the tips of his pedes; instinctively Soundwave found himself bending forward just a little to accommodate him.

“Jazz,” he whispered, “five. We are, *finalmente*, at a tie.”

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on time

Soundwave was no stranger to the quiet. He preferred it, and often used it to his advantage. Other mechs got nervous when confronted with his characteristic silence and scrambled to please him; most of them assumed that because he wasn't talking, he was scanning their thoughts. That was rarely the case, but he still liked the quiet.

Not this kind of quiet, though. Soundwave and Jazz finished their shower and Soundwave toweled off Jazz with his personal drying cloth, all in silence. Soundwave had ordered Jazz not to speak because he couldn't bear the words coming out of his mouth, but the alternative wasn't much better. They'd often been alone in this apartment together without speaking, could play hax for joors on end without a single word between them, but now it was different. Now Jazz *knew*. The weight of that knowledge pulled at the air around them, turning the silence into something heavy and thick. Soundwave hated it, for once, and wondered how it would be broken.

It turned out to be the last way he'd have ever expected.

Jazz turned his face up, startled, when the unfamiliar chime resonated through the apartment. Halfway through polishing Jazz, Soundwave also went quite still.

"What's that noise?"

"Announcement of presence, building entrance."

"The *doorbell*?" Jazz tugged his leg out of Soundwave's grasp, looking incredulous. "Somebody's here to see you? I mean, *you*?"

"Apparently," Soundwave answered frostily, remotely accessing his security system to see who it was.

"Are they lost?"

Shockwave. Wariness prickled up within Soundwave; this was an unprecedented visit as well as an unexpected one. He rose.

"Jazz, remain here."

"At least tell me who it is."

"Stay."

He left the apartment quickly, letting the door lock behind him, and performed a few full vent cycles to compose himself. Shockwave would not be able to see anything amiss, no matter what, but Soundwave needed to be at his best. Of all times, of any orn, why did he have to pick this one to visit?

Soundwave entered the lift, and keyed the bottom floor. None of the other buttons got much use. After the Decepticons' victorious return to the city, the officers had all scrambled to claim the biggest and most beautiful buildings for their own residence, not that many were left after centuries of warfare. Soundwave took this small, battle-scarred apartment building for himself. Most of the floors were unfit to live in, but the penthouse loft was habitable enough. Anxious to nurture his four new charges in a peaceful, stable environment, he'd moved in very quickly. Long Haul and Windcharger had cleaned all the debris out of the first floor, but Soundwave had done nothing more

to make it welcoming to guests. Why should he? Nobody came to this place. Nobody, until now.

"Greetings, Director Soundwave." Shockwave had been gazing at the ragged gouges in the walls, but when the lift doors slid open he turned towards Soundwave. Two of the bodyguard drones that always accompanied him twitched at the new presence, then relaxed at a signal from their master. Soundwave bowed, not as deeply as he would for Lord Megatron, but still a bow.

"Premier Shockwave."

"I hope that I have not greatly inconvenienced you by dropping by your, er, home without invitation. I am well aware, as are all Decepticons, how you prefer your privacy."

"Inconvenience, insignificant."

"I came to inquire after your welfare. You left the command room so swiftly yesterday, and did not come back even after Lord Megatron called for a return to business. We were concerned."

Inwardly, Soundwave winced. Was it only yesterday? He'd completely forgotten that he ever even entered that command room, after what happened with Jazz.

"Your servant Rumble explained that some delicate surveillance equipment had been smashed, and you had to see to its replacement. Where was this equipment? Was a careless Neutral responsible? Do you require assistance from the Constructicons to replace it?"

"All surveillance stations, now at full operational status," Soundwave answered, which was no lie even if it did borrow shamelessly from Rumble's cover story. "No assistance necessary. Gratitude extended."

"Ah. I am relieved to hear it. More than any other Decepticon, save for our Lord Megatron, I am grateful for the security that your thorough observation provides to us, Director Soundwave. Your contributions to the budding new empire cannot be overestimated."

He paused, but Soundwave sensed he wasn't finished. Silently he waited.

"It will be a glorious Cybertron when it is finally rebuilt," Shockwave said firmly, if he perhaps thought Soundwave might disagree. "Even if we must begin with just one city. I'm sure you are as eager as I, Director Soundwave, to see the complete repair and resettlement of Iacon. But there are some out there who perhaps do not agree. Some, perhaps, who think that resources are wasted on reconstruction. Ludicrous, isn't it? Yet they do exist."

The shape of the conversation was becoming more clear to Soundwave, unfortunately. Wearily he waited for the rest.

"I'm concerned, Director Soundwave, deeply concerned. Lord Megatron has given me just ten orns to show real progress with this new project, or he'll return the strong minibot to Earth. I have no fear that I could prove the project worthy, but it is in Starscream's interest that I fail."

Shockwave's lone golden optic glowed intensely for a moment. "He is a dishonorable mech who's not above sabotaging my own reconstruction sites in order to further his own ambitions. You know this as well as I do, Director Soundwave. I would like your guarantee that your servants are always patrolling my work sites, for it's the only way I can be sure he won't go creeping in to undo my good work."

"Cassetticons, number only five. Responsible for watching all Iacon. Impossible to -"

"But this is important, Director Soundwave. Don't you agree that the city must be rebuilt? Don't you agree that factories are the life-fuel our struggling new economy needs? Starscream frets over academia, when it is prosperity we need more than anything. Studies in science are a luxury that can come later."

Since it wasn't a question, Soundwave gave no answer. After Shockwave waited for a few nanokliks, he continued with a huff. "I cannot believe that there is any other portion of Iacon that warrants scrutiny like my chosen sites. Surely you can spare the effort for ten orn. I would be very... disposed to lending you some assistance in the future, when you require it. The Constructicons would be only too happy to renovate this appalling hovel."

"Renovation unnecessary," Soundwave said sharply. "Home, comfortable and functional."

"Oh dear, have I offended you, Director Soundwave? I apologize. But I'm afraid I cannot let this matter rest until I've obtained your guarantee of security."

"Suggestion, petition Megatron."

"And burden him with my paranoia? I think not. I should prefer to keep this arrangement discreet."

Soundwave was getting tired of his presence. "Will consult Cassetticons and review resources."

"Is that a yes?"

"Perhaps. Will submit answer later this orn. Acceptable?"

"I suppose it will have to do. For now." Shockwave clicked his claws together in a way that suggested he was not happy at all, but he did not have the authority to force Soundwave to his bidding, and they both knew it. "I eagerly await your confirmation, Director Soundwave. Good orn to you."

The drones stirred to life and marched outside, Shockwave following more sedately in their wake. Soundwave opened his vents wide, expelling a much-needed sigh. Really, must they insist on involving him in their petty feuds? Before he could begin to turn over Shockwave's demand in his mind, something in the shadows above shifted. A Jazz-shaped piece of the ceiling peeled away to hang by the knees, visor glowing brightly blue against the gloom.

"So that's who it was. How boring. Shockwave isn't fun at all."

Soundwave at least managed not to flinch with surprise, even if his systems did skip a beat. The first floor of this building was utterly silent. Nothing in it had moved or made any sound, save for Shockwave and himself. That Jazz could slink through the ceiling, close enough to hear every word of a conversation between two of Megatron's top officers, was nothing short of unnerving. During the war, Soundwave had wondered thousands of times how the Autobots could so often infiltrate Decepticon headquarters. Now he knew.

"Order given: remain upstairs."

"Yeah, well, I... didn't."

"Jazz, disobedient and impertinent. Deserves punishment."

"Well *you* shouldn't have left me -" Jazz cut himself off abruptly, and to Soundwave's vision, seemed to shrink into himself a little. When he spoke again, his voice was more subdued. "I didn't want to be alone up there. Don't make me be alone in that apartment."



Whatever anger Soundwave had been inclined to feel promptly dissolved. He could not be angry at Jazz for not wanting to be alone amongst the ghosts of his greatest failure. He wondered what to say, but Jazz spared him.

"Anyway, I don't want to talk about that. Let's talk about Cyclops instead. Why do you think he came by?"

"Shockwave, concerned for reconstruction projects. Seeking increased surveillance."

"Yeah, I heard him say that too, but for that he could have just called. I mean, why did he *come here*? I've been with you long enough to know that it's unheard of."

Soundwave wondered if Jazz was getting a little dizzy, hanging upside down like that. They were, in fact, more or less at optic level with one another like this, which he realized as he drew closer. Maybe that was why Jazz was inclined to stay where he was.

"Shockwave, protecting himself from Starscream. Desires my support."

"Desires an alliance, you mean. That's a problem. You don't want to get pulled into that catfight."

"Negative."

"But if it's coming to your own front door, then you might not have much of a choice. Now that he's asked, you're kinda trapped. If you refuse, Shockwave'll assume you're taking Starscream's side."

"Affirmative," Soundwave agreed, unhappily.

"If anything happens to the sites, Shockwave might blame you just as much as he blames Starscream."

"Also affirmative."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Undecided. Strong likelihood: survey chosen sites. Perceived partnership with Starscream, undesirable."

"By everyone in this house, I'm sure. But that won't solve your problem." The visor shuttered for a moment, Jazz looking deep in thought. "It goes deeper than that. Shockwave's a jealous mech. I've seen it."

Blue light flickered on again. "He hoards his power and influence with Megatron, and doesn't like to share. He doesn't like it that Megatron likes you, and he *hates* the fact that you have something he needs. To Shockwave, if you're worth forming an alliance with, then you're strong enough to be a threat later on. That's why he came here, to your secret lair. He's trying to suss you out, decide how dangerous you are. If only he'd thought to ask me. I could tell him you don't want anything but to be left alone with all your pets, me included." Jazz grinned an upside down grin at him. "I think Starscream, for all he hates your gears, at least gets that about you. Shockwave doesn't. You'll have to be careful, just for him."

It was a statement unerringly close to Starscream's whispers, much as Soundwave would have preferred to ignore them.

"Decepticon politics, too well understood."

"It is my misfortune that I've had a front row seat for a long time. No one gave me any choice in the matter."

Jazz flashed that grin at him again, and in one smooth motion uncurled himself to drop pede-first on the floor. He brushed a few specks of dust off his armor. "Can we go for a walk? I know it's not holding to your sacred schedule, but your routine's all messed up today anyway, thanks to me. We both need fresh air."

Soundwave could find no error in this. He was not very anxious to go back upstairs either.

"Affirmative. Fetch chains."

"Chains, of course." Jazz bowed his head, with that subtle mocking air. "Mustn't forget those chains. I'll be right down. Master."

---

"What a dump," Jazz muttered. Soundwave could not make himself disagree. Together the two of them stood on the walkway, facing Shockwave's proposed renovation site, momentarily overwhelmed by the rusted behemoth. Whole chunks of the walls were missing, revealing a twisted and broken assembly line inside. The top floors did not look sturdy enough to bear a mech's weight. This was not in the unrepaired sectors; the street behind them was lively and full of mechs going about their business, but it was such a derelict wreck that it seemed not to belong here.

"Shockwave really wants to turn this into something functional? In ten orns? Scrapper's got his work cut out for him." Jazz snorted softly, and took a step onto the grounds. "Actually, it would be Grapple, and Hoist, and Windcharger that have got their work cut out for them. I'm sure he doesn't give them coffee breaks."

He moved closer, leaving Soundwave to wonder what coffee had to do with anything, and also how one could break it. Not that he particularly cared. To him, it was just a relief to have Jazz talking. Thus far their walk had been nothing but one contiguous stretch of awkward silence. Jazz's usual cheerful interest in their surroundings was conspicuously absent, as was his teasing, or laughing, or dancing. When they got close to their usual street market, Jazz had hung back, shaking his head, and Soundwave would not force him. Of course, this left him with very little idea of where else to go, so in desperation he'd chosen this place. He would need to inspect it anyway, and there was no harm in bringing Jazz along.

"Caution advised," he warned, following just a few steps behind. "Avoid disturbing wreckage."

"What, you mean like this?" Deliberately Jazz kicked a scrap of metal and it went skittering across the ground, colliding against a beam with a clang. "Oops, clumsy me. I'll try to be more careful, master. Hard to believe that Starscream and Shockwave are at each other's throats over a junkyard like this. Politics does strange things to mecha, doesn't it?"

"Affirmative."

Silence, again. Soundwave suddenly found himself unsure of his answer; maybe Jazz wanted to have a conversation about it? Maybe simple agreement was the wrong reply. Perhaps he should try to add something, but he had nothing to say. Discussions like that had no appeal for him.

While he was hesitating, Jazz fidgeted and clinked his chains. "So, here we are. What do you have to do?"

"Evaluate angles, fields of vision, for ideal camera placement." He couldn't have answered more quickly. Relieved, Soundwave switched his visor settings and looked up, using enhanced programs to measure distances and angle degrees precisely. He pointed at a promising corner of the nearest building. "That location, suitable."

"Sticking it up there is a task for the brats, I take it."

"Affirmative."

"How many total?"

"Unconfirmed. More examination necessary."

Soundwave put out a non-urgent summons for Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, then unspaced a datapad for his notes. Next followed the chore of walking around the circumference of the factory, scouting for additional locations and weighing their viability. This wasn't a surveillance task he wanted, but since he'd decided to do it, it must be done right. He did not order Jazz to stay with him but Jazz did anyway, hopping from the top of one obstacle to another rather than walking around them. Every now and then Soundwave stopped to download more information into the datapad, and once when he looked up he caught Jazz watching him.

Uncharacteristically, Jazz was quick to look away and said nothing. Strange. Soundwave sensed that uncomfortable silence cropping up again.

"Jazz, tired?"

"No."

"Hungry?"

"Stuffed full, thanks."

He sprang lightly to his next perch, leaving Soundwave behind to sigh unhappily. They finished their circuit of the perimeter and moved inside, Soundwave warning Jazz yet again to be careful and disturb nothing.

The interior would be trickier to monitor. Since Scrapper and his crew would be demolishing and rebuilding all this twisted machinery, few cameras would be safe. The twins would have to replace them at the onset of every night cycle, and re-evaluate prime targets when doing so, since that would surely change with the reconstruction. He was just thinking that when they glided in through one of the gaping holes, circling him and Jazz once before landing.

*"Master, with Jazz,"* Laserbeak was pleased to point out, and even Buzzsaw looked vaguely interested. *"Anger, resolved?"*

*"Unconfirmed."* Soundwave set the datapad between them. "Current priority, this factory. Objective: guard reconstruction from possible sabotage. Download schematics and instructions. Review; adapt if necessary."

Buzzsaw's optics narrowed at their surroundings. *"Factory, not military."*

"Civilian. Request for security, per Shockwave."

"*Shockwave?*" both of them echoed.

"*Not your superior.*"

"*Cannot order your personal monitoring.*"

"Affirmative." Soundwave let his reluctance slip through the link. "Accommodation, done for diplomatic reasons. Consensus, this best option."

They both blinked and straightened their necks at that, curiosity suddenly at full flame.

"*Consensus?*" they repeated. "*Of who?*"

"Myself. And... Jazz."

Their first reaction was startled disbelief, then dismay from Buzzsaw and a disturbing thoughtfulness from Laserbeak.

"*Autobot, only sla-*"

"*Hush,*" Laserbeak interrupted, when Buzzsaw tried to protest. "*Interesting.*"

Buzzsaw hunched his wings with resentment, then tilted his head from one side to another in confusion. "*Autobot, where?*"

Oh, not again. Soundwave quickly turned again and scanned the interior of the factory, finding nothing. Experience then prompted him to look up. From the catwalk one flight up, Jazz grinned down at him.

"Gettin' better, Soundwave. Good for you."

"Come down, now."

"In a nano. I need to check something."

"Jazz -"

"Do you see this?" Jazz traced a fingertip along an old pipe, one that ran just over his head. "It's the coolant pipe, and it's still intact. For now. But say it got one little crack in it, or a few screws somehow got loosened. Best way to send a factory sky-high, in my *considerable* experience. If Starscream really does try anything, I bet ya it'll be right here. Much less obvious than explosives; impossible to trace."

For a moment, Soundwave wasn't quite sure if this stunned feeling was his own or washing in from the twins. Probably both.

"Better make sure to keep an optic on it, in any case," Jazz continued airily. "Consider it a hot spot."

"Reason, Jazz sharing information?"

"What, don't you want my help?"

"No," Soundwave said quickly. "Assistance appreciated. Reasons, not understood."

"Can't say I know either." Jazz shrugged. "Guess I just feel like it. You didn't want to get stuck with this job, after all."

Laserbeak was clucking softly behind him, puffed up and so pleased with herself that she could burst. Annoyed, Buzzsaw nipped her in the wing. Gracefully Jazz swung over the rail and slid back down to the ground via a heavy industrial chain, his own chains not impeding him in the least. A rather troubling thought occurred to Soundwave.

"Reasons, Jazz did not sabotage this factory?"

"Ah, stupid me." Jazz slapped his palm against his forehead, vents huffing a melodramatic sigh.

"Silly Jazz, why didn't I think of that? It would have been no trouble at all to sneak out of your apartment and reduce this place to scrap, and that it belongs to Shockwave would have just been a happy bonus. I have a special reason to hate him, you see." Jazz flashed him one of his trademark grins, but it faded into sadness. "But it wouldn't undo the end of the war. It wouldn't bring down the empire. At the end of the day, it wouldn't do anything but make my friends have to start the work all over again. So no, I won't be dismantling Shockwave's projects. My hands are well and truly tied."

He slipped aside before Soundwave could quite reach him, trying to give the comfort Jazz obviously needed. "There's probably a few more hot spots, if you'll let me look for them. Do you want me to show them to you?"

"Affirmative." Soundwave had to settle for stroking Laserbeak instead. Sympathetically, she nuzzled up to his armor. "Assistance, appreciated."

---

Thanks in part to Jazz, Soundwave completed a thorough analysis of the site that orn. He calculated cameras necessary, and their placement, and confirmed manual surveillance schedules for Laserbeak and Buzzsaw. He drafted a full report on the project, with as much effort as anything he'd ever prepare for Megatron. He downloaded the full report onto a blank datapad, encrypted it three layers deep, and summoned Ravage to deliver it to Shockwave. Ravage was more inconspicuous than Soundwave by far, especially in Decepticon headquarters. All Soundwave wanted was to carry out this new assignment quickly and quietly, with no indication to Starscream that Soundwave was providing assistance to Shockwave. That was a headache Soundwave didn't care to contemplate.

He did all these things, and still found himself not knowing what to do with Jazz. Sometime while he'd been conferring with Ravage, Jazz had made himself comfortable in his usual corner, flat on his back beneath the window sill, tapping at his datapad. This was their usual time to play hax, but Soundwave sensed he wasn't in the mood. He hadn't said a word since the factory.

"Assistance today, appreciated."

"So you said."

Silence, still of the awkward variety. Soundwave sat on the couch. He wished Jazz would understand that he could relax and play his puzzle games here and not on the floor.

"Jazz, hungry?" he tried again. It wasn't feeding time yet, but he'd missed so many yesterday, maybe

he was still catching up.

"No." He wasn't. More silence. Soundwave fretted.

"Temperature, 2.6 degrees higher than average, currently."

That, finally, got a reaction. Jazz's visor rebooted itself and he looked right at Soundwave.

"...what?"

"Probable cause, gathering pollutants," Soundwave continued, quick to exploit this opening. "Cloud formation, evident." Indeed they were massing in the sky, obscuring the usual star-studded view.

"Forthcoming rain, predicted within two orns."

"Again... what?"

"Jazz, disagrees?"

Jazz did not check the window. He was too busy staring at Soundwave in astonishment.

"You're trying to do small talk."

"Affirmative."

"Primus. That's the saddest thing I've ever seen."

Soundwave's vents opened a little wider, trying to cope with the unfamiliar heat of embarrassment.

But then, directly counter to what he'd just said, Jazz laughed. It didn't last long, but it was as sincere and genuine as Soundwave had ever heard him.

"Wow... I really am something. I made Soundwave, the most laconic of Cons, attempt small talk. Amazing."

He relaxed back against the floor with a sigh, sparing a wan smile for Soundwave. "If you'll excuse the expression, Blaster would have *died* with laughter if he heard that. He often theorized that if you ever strung more than ten words together, you'd combust."

Soundave tensed, but there was nothing accusatory in Jazz's tone. An amused look still lingered on his dermal plating.

"Stop trying, lover. It doesn't suit you at all. And it isn't going to get you what you want."

"What will?"

"Time. Just let me have some, would you?"

Soundwave slumped a little against the cushions. "Request, granted."

*"Gracce."*

He would have counted the incident a total failure, but two and a half breems later, he heard Jazz chuckle again.

---

Time, he gave. For three full cycles he kept his distance from Jazz and let him do as he pleased, in so far that he stayed within Soundwave's rules. Mostly this involved spending his time curled up in the corner, playing one of the several dozen puzzle games that Soundwave had bought for him. The loft was utterly quiet. Jazz wasn't much in the mood to talk, and only Ravage, Laserbeak, and Buzzsaw were coming home. Neither of the elder twins made so much as an appearance.

Soundwave sensed Rumble wanted to come home, but he was unfailingly loyal to his brother, and Frenzy was still rattled by what happened with Jazz.

His home had become lonely again. Even at night before recharge, Soundwave did not try to hold Jazz in his arms. Side by side, they went to sleep alone, and Soundwave was unhappier than he'd been since the night he brought Jazz home. They all were.

Rain finally came at the end of the orn. Soundwave had been just a little off in his prediction, but Shockwave, who had been running Cybertron for centuries, had a more precise understanding of the prevailing conditions and broadcast a warning memo to the entire city. Enough pollutants had gathered to provide critical mass, and the result would be several straight joors of precipitation.

"Acidic content?" Soundwave questioned Rumble. They were in his office at Headquarters. All of Iacon was busy preparing for the oncoming shower, spreading absorbent gel over exposed surfaces and ensuring any cracks in their ceilings had been seen to. Soundwave wanted to check that his exterior surveillance stations around the building were properly covered, and now he was using the monitors in his office to flip through the feed from every camera in Iacon.

"43.6%," Rumble answered. "Hard enough to scar metal, but Shockwave says it won't disfigure buildings. And it's set to start tonight. Be inside by 36:00, or be melted. Shockwave says it'll be over by tomorrow, 07:00."

"Ah, Cybertron weather, how I have not missed you," Jazz sighed. "Score one for Earth. At least there you can dance in the rain without your armor peeling off. I do a great Gene Kelly."

Soundwave shot Jazz a puzzled look. "Gene Kelly, not known."

"I'd guessed as much," was the very dry reply.

"Can we go now?" Frenzy asked curtly. He'd flinched when they walked in and saw Jazz, and hadn't stopped fidgeting since.

"Affirmative," Soundwave answered. "Assignment, review camera stations, numbers 12, 36, 48, 61, 93. Ensure protection from rain."

"All of those?" they whined in unison. "But -"

"Contacting Ravage to assist. Time, sufficient. Rumble, Frenzy dismissed."

"Fi~ine." They turned to the door.

*"Rumble, Frenzy, return home before rain. Tonight, synchronization necessary."*

Frenzy's ventilations hitched and he threw another hunted look at Jazz, who was absorbed in the flickering monitors and didn't seem to notice. *"Come home? But -"*

*"No argument."*

Frenzy glared sullenly, but Rumble elbowed him. *"We'll be there. Nothin' to do when it's raining anyway. C'mon, Frenz."* He grabbed his brother's hand and dragged him out the door before Frenzy could argue anymore. The door slid shut behind them.

"Is he angry?" Jazz asked. "Or scared?"

Surprised, Soundwave looked up, but he didn't get a chance to answer. "Never mind. He's got a right to both. Ah, I really did do an awful thing to him - even by the standards of my conscience, which is saying something. I owe him an apology."

Jazz grinned ruefully and leaned back against his consoles. "Apologizin' to Decepticons... what has this world come to?"

"Apology, likely ineffective," Soundwave pointed out. "Frenzy, very upset."

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of a way."

Jazz hopped up to sit on the edge of the desk; Soundwave snapped his fingers at him. "Off."

"It's only a console, Soundwave. You know I could have done so much worse to it the time you locked me in here." Jazz did, however, slide obediently back onto his feet.

Soundwave did not deign to look at Jazz just then, though he knew well enough that he was right. It made his tanks churn uneasily just thinking about it, and had been since their trip to the factory. No matter what Jazz said about the slave collar tying him down, there was still so much damage he could have done. So many times he could have slipped away, during the night or in the day while Soundwave worked in his office. What was the word to describe Jazz's restraint? Humoring? Soundwave didn't care for it, but it seemed to fit. Jazz was *humoring* his Decepticon masters, and that was a security hole that Soundwave intended to repair. He'd already begun upgrading the alarms in his building.

"How much longer? Can't say I like the thought of gettin' caught in the rain on the way home."

"Time remaining, ample," he assured Jazz. "Work here, complete."

He logged off and shut down the console, ushering Jazz out before the door locked behind them.

"43% is higher than it's been since the end of the war, isn't it? That's interesting, because I've been hearing Shockwave blame the acid on explosives' fallout for a long time. No more bombs getting tossed back and forth, so what's makin' the count go up? Could it be that his industry programs aren't quite as efficient as he likes to say?"

"Jazz, hush." Jazz never bothered to lower his voice in these halls, and Soundwave was extremely conscious of the glances passing Decepticons shot them.

"What? I'm talking about the weather, you love talking about the weather."

"Jazz -"

"SOUNDWAVE!"

They were just cutting through the grand antechamber when Starscream's screech split the air, carrying across the vast space with perfect clarity. It was the kind of shout meant to draw attention, and it did - every mech in the hall stopped and looked up. It was also so well-timed that Soundwave knew it could be no coincidence; Starscream must have been waiting in ambush. Twenty tons of



bristling Seeker was marching toward him at a determined clip.

"Speaking of acidic content," Jazz muttered, and tilted a little closer to Soundwave. "C'mon, let's make a run for it. We can make it if we go fast. One, two -"

"Jazz." Soundwave pressed a hand against his tensing frame, holding him back, and Jazz pouted.

"You're no fun."

"Don't you move," snarled Starscream, as if he'd heard them. "I have things to say to you."

He planted himself directly in front of Soundwave, with all his usual respect for personal space. Soundwave did not back up.

*"Problem, evident? Suggestion, discuss in private."*

Starscream failed to catch the hint. "Oh, I'm not interested in keeping any secrets. Unlike other mechs I could name. And will. Did you think I wouldn't find out about your little arrangement with Shockwave? That you two weren't partnering up to spy on us Decepticons?"

Now everyone was listening, even if they were trying their hardest not to look it. Soundwave stiffened just a little.

"Spying, inaccurate," he said coldly. "Security, accurate. Security, my assigned task."

"Security for *Megatron*, and the Decepticon empire. Since when does that include civilian-owned factories?"

It was becoming more clear why Starscream wanted this argument public. Soundwave refused to back down. "Security deemed necessary. Sabotage, possible threat."

He'd hoped that might strike a nerve wire, but Starscream gave a haughty toss of the head.

"Shockwave convinced you that I was a threat to his precious pet project, didn't he? Got you to provide empire surveillance because I might go sneaking in to fiddle with the wires? As if I'd ever stoop to something so... obvious. Did you really think I'd fall for such deliberate baiting on Shockwave's part?"

*Verdammt,*" Jazz swore softly, looking more annoyed than anything. *"Damn it. I hate it when Starscream's right. Of course he would have never done anything - not sneaky enough for his standards."*

Starscream had downloaded a few human languages, but German evidently wasn't one of them.

Optics moved from Soundwave to Jazz, glowering. "Zip your lip plating, slave, this doesn't concern you."

"Perpetrator, not a concern," Soundwave said firmly, while nudging Jazz back a step. "Surveillance provided, merely preventative measure."

"I don't believe that for an astrosec, but even if that's true, you still let Shockwave connive you into using empire resources for his friends' private factory. Pathetic, Soundwave. I warned you not to let yourself get tangled in his agendas. How do you think I found out about it? He could hardly wait to tell me, just so he could see the look on my face when he bragged he had you at his disposal."

Anger began to burn within Soundwave, and no little humiliation. Jazz muttered quietly, "My audios are startin' to hurt. Can we go?"

"I said shut up, slave!"

"Surveillance for Shockwave, only favor," Soundwave snapped. "*Unlikely* to be repeated. Your advice, not forgotten. This conversation, over."

"I hope for both our sakes that we won't have to repeat it." Starscream lifted his chin imperiously. "You're dismissed."

It was a calculated slight. Starscream outranked Soundwave, but only on the battlefield, and they both knew he had no business dismissing Soundwave in such a high-handed fashion. Before Soundwave could determine the best response, Jazz let out a mocking laugh.

"Can we, Starscream, really? Are you sure you're not done shouting to the world how innocent you are? Supposin' this little confrontation doesn't make it back to Megatron's audios after all? Maybe you should drag it out a little more, else he'll never hear about it."

Starscream's wings gave just the tiniest of twitches, but he covered it quickly enough by huffing hot air out of his vents and narrowing optics at Jazz. "That's twice I've warned you to silence, slave. If you can't keep your mouth shut, I'll smack it shut for you."

"Oh, Starscream. What would you know about keeping a mouth shut?"

Soundwave yanked Jazz back just in time before Starscream could smash his fist into his face, bringing his formidable height and mass to bear. "Jazz mine," he reminded Starscream. "Not yours. Physical contact not permitted."

"Insolent little glitch," Starscream spat, not taking his optics off Jazz for an astrosec. His hands were still in fists. "If you were mine, slave, I would beat you into stasis every night."

"If I were yours, Starscream," Jazz promptly bounced back, "I'd welcome the stasis."

Most of their audience snickered. Starscream's engine growled, low and ominous, optics burning with frustrated violence.

"That mouth of his is going to get your slave *killed* one of these days, Soundwave." His scowl twisted into an ugly smirk. "And then you'll be five for five, won't you?"

There were not many things Starscream could say that could hurt Soundwave, but that sliced effortlessly through his armor and into his spark chamber. For a single astrosec his spark twisted in grief, and Soundwave scrambled to suppress the crippling pain before it could panic his symbiotes. His impassive appearance was no trouble to maintain, but his focus had scattered, and he had no response to give. The angry rev of another engine surprised him out of his turmoil. Jazz's posture had gone very tense, and the gleam in his visor was vicious.

"That was a bad move, Starscream." His voice had dropped to a murmur, barely audible over his own rumbling engine. Nobody else could hear. "You want to walk away now, before I do something that you'll regret."

Starscream gaped, before he rearranged his expression into a sneer. "And just what, slave, do *you* think you can do to *me*?" He poked Jazz right on the Autobot sigil, hard enough to almost shove Jazz almost off balance. Soundwave could swear by Jazz's fleeting smile that Starscream's response pleased him.

If he really did smile, it was gone quickly enough. Jazz's shoulders dropped, and suddenly he was every inch the submissive slave. "Nothing," he answered simply enough. "After all... it's true that I

am just a slave. And you're Starscream, head of the Decepticon Air Forces, second only to Megatron himself. And I have to admit you've been doing an amazing job of it - the 'being second', I mean. After this war ended, everyone was so sure you'd make a grab for the top spot, but I think even the most cynical Decepticons all agree that you've accepted your place as Megatron's servant. You carry out his orders so well."

Starscream's mouth fell open just a little. "Well, I -"

"Maybe it is because you're scared of Megatron. Maybe it's because you know your rank and status were really meant for a planet at war, not at peace. I overhear so many conversations, it's hard to know who's right. I'm sure it's not because of Skyfire - as if you'd ever let yourself be manipulated through an *Autobot*, one that *publicly betrayed* you - no matter what everybody says." Jazz's voice kept creeping up in volume, and if their audience had been interested before, now they were riveted. Nobody was even pretending not to watch. "You're in no hurry to collect him, I know. I'm sure the Stunticons are treatin' him just fine."

"I don't -"

"Besides, you don't have time to worry about a nothing like him, right? You've got to concentrate on putting together a top-notch science academy out of, essentially, nothing, for a chance of approval from Megatron that may or may not ever happen. If you ever do get it built, you'll be so grateful that you'll just have to name it after him. Won't that be wonderful? Good thing you can count on help, too; the other Seekers are such dependable, sensible underlings. I'm really in awe of how you manage it all, Starscream. Thank *Primus* that Megatron's decreed Vos too ruined for resettlement, so at least you don't have the added burden of rebuilding your home city, not to mention all that nasty stress of ruling it afterwards. What a relief."

Occasionally, back on Earth, Soundwave had watched fish swim up to the *Nemesis* and drift there, entranced by the lights. Starscream struck a curious resemblance to them now, complete with his mouth opening and closing as he struggled to find words. When did Jazz move in between him and Soundwave, anyway? There was something almost protective in his bristling stance, his optic level with Starscream's nosecone notwithstanding. He poked it, mimicking Starscream's gesture.

"I got more," he whispered. "So start walkin'."

And much to Soundwave's amazement, Starscream did exactly that. No snide parting shot, no petulant glare, no nasty whispers about forthcoming retaliation. Optics still slightly glazed, Starscream simply turned and walked away. Soundwave wasn't so naive to think there wouldn't be repercussions later, but for the sweet silence of his swift exit, it was worth it. He didn't think Starscream even heard the muffled laughter every mech was hiding behind their hands.

"There was no part of that," Jazz decided, "that was not fun."

The vicious gleam was gone. Jazz was grinning, looking quite at ease, nothing like the stunned disbelief whirling around inside Soundwave. He waited expectantly, heard nothing from Soundwave, and tilted his head with a touch of disappointment.

"Not impressed, huh? Well, I think it worked pretty well. So I won't apologize for embarrassing a Decepticon officer, master, no matter how much you scold me. It just felt too good."

There was something almost affectionate in the way he flicked Soundwave on the chest.

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The rain fell that night, acid spilling out of the pollutant clouds and washing through the city. It pattered softly against the rooftop, a light prickling sound that comfortably filled the silence. The noise and chatter of his symbiotes seemed distant and unreal, now that the door had shut. They were alone in his berth chamber, Jazz's visor a soft blue glow against the dusk. He was the first to speak.

"Didn't want to watch the twins play *Resident Evil*?"

Soundwave stared at his slave. "Turn."

Jazz's little smile slipped a bit, but after a nano's hesitation he complied. He twitched when Soundwave rested his hands on his back, but Soundwave only pressed gentle palms against his armor and nothing more.

"This is about what happened today, isn't it?" Jazz's voice had dropped in volume. "You shouldn't make too much of it, you know. Starscream had it coming; he didn't deserve to talk about that. I got angry. It happens. You've seen me do it before."

"Observation," Soundwave murmured. "Jazz antagonizes Decepticons to defend friends."

His hands glided downward and then up again, pressing in all the right places. Jazz's struts straightened under his touch, vibrating with wary tension, but he didn't try to lean away. "Maybe I was defending Blaster and his little bots, then."

"Perhaps. However, residual effect appreciated."

"Don't think this changes anything." Jazz's voice kept getting softer. "Don't let yourself think this means I like you, or that I want anything to do with y- oh." His engine kicked up for a moment when Soundwave gathered him into his arms. He did nothing else, only held Jazz to himself, in a way he hadn't done since before the truth came out. Jazz's systems ran hot for a klik, but when Soundwave didn't move he felt Jazz subside. Reluctantly he relaxed in the embrace, even if he didn't return it, and all the while the rain still dappled against the roof. By tomorrow, all the streets in Iacon would be scoured clean.

"Jazz."

"Soundwave." His voice was quieter than the rain.

"Today, good work."

"You're welcome."

Something changed, after that night. The silences between them were comfortable again. They went back to their daily walks and bouts of hax, and everything was just the way it used to be. Mostly. Every now and then Soundwave caught Jazz watching him, but instead of the wicked smile Jazz used to grace him with, he only looked thoughtful. Something in the atmosphere of his home changed too; as quickly as the memories of death had crowded into it, they fled again. Soundwave never did find out if Jazz apologized to Frenzy. But he did catch Jazz whispering in Frenzy's audio once, when he walked into the common room. Two orns later, Starscream commed him, shrieking that his work console was playing some human song about a 'small world' over and over, and

nothing could make it stop. Frenzy looked quite pleased with himself that night, no matter how he tried to hide it, and Jazz didn't even bother to. Soundwave with all his languages could not have named it, but yes, something had changed. It was better, it was warm, it was Jazz.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on jealousy

*"Slow pace. Speed, currently excessive."*

*"My safety, a concern? Fear separation?"*

*"Negative. Your speed excessive to Master's pace, current solution: frequent looping back. Result: causing dizziness for me. So, slow pace."*

*"Alternative solution: join me."*

*"Unnecessary, comfortable here."*

*"Unable to see everything."*

*"Irrelevant. This street, monitored often during patrols. All seen before."*

*"Untrue! Active cycle, different from night cycle. Marketplace fascinating."*

*"For sister, everything fascinating."*

*"For brother, everything boring. I win."*

Perched on Soundwave's shoulder, Buzzsaw hunched further down between his wings and glared balefully at his twin coasting overhead. It was more or less inevitable that the younger twins were here, no longer able to contain their curiosity about Soundwave's daily walks with Jazz. Cassette models were built curious, and they insisted this orn that they stay out of his chest so they could come along. Actually, Laserbeak insisted, and Buzzsaw pretended not to care. He was no less interested, but experience taught him a long time ago that someone had to restrain Laserbeak's enthusiasm.

*"Difficult to be sensible one,"* Buzzsaw grumped, while Laserbeak fluttered off to inspect another stall.

*"Buzzsaw, not in recharge,"* she sang.

*"Quiet."*

Buzzsaw could complain a thousand times (and had) that it was a tiresome chore to constantly chase after his sister, but Soundwave knew he never slept without her. So on his shoulder he stayed, studying the world around them through half-shuttered optics while Laserbeak absorbed it with hers wide open.

*"Jazz, popular here,"* she observed. *"Reasons why?"*

She was right about that. The vendors on their normal route had learned by now that Soundwave would buy anything that Jazz so much as looked at, and they eagerly vied for his slave's attention, pushing as close as they dared. In answer to Laserbeak's question, Soundwave beckoned today's lucky mech closer, to purchase whatever it was that Jazz's gaze had lingered on. Jazz had yet to ever thank Soundwave, or even acknowledge that it was going on, but since he spent all his time in the

loft playing these games, Soundwave was confident he was grateful.

"So are they having fun?"

Soundwave looked up at the sound of Jazz's voice. "Twins, satisfied. Affirmative."

"Looks to me like Laserbeak's gettin' more out of this than Woodstock here." Jazz closed the distance between them by a few steps, which effectively scattered the vendors, and peered up at Buzzsaw's unwelcoming glare. "What's the matter? Too boring for ya? I can change that."

*"Woodstock?"*

"Woodstock?" Soundwave repeated aloud, just as puzzled.

"He's yellow. He flies, and he doesn't talk. Woodstock." To Jazz it seemed to make perfect sense, and he turned away with a hum in his throat and a skip in his step. Baffled, Buzzsaw retreated back under his tent of wings with a disgruntled cluck.

*"Your slave. Your task to understand."*

"So I've been thinking about Shockwave," Jazz said casually, sliding a disinterested gaze past a cheap painting stall. "Detestable and unpleasant activity, true, but I can't seem to help myself. I couldn't believe that he just went and spilled the oil to Starscream like that; it surprised me, and I am not used to being surprised by Decepticons, Cyclops least of all. He must have decided it was worth more to enrage Starscream than to bother with keeping your trust. I think he knew all along that Starscream was never very likely to try anything with his precious factories, not when Megatron himself would suspect Starscream first anyway. He wanted to see if he could get you to provide free security, which you did, and when he was through with getting what he wanted out of you, he tattled to pit you and Starscream against one another. He's a smart bastard, I'll give him that."

In the back of his mind Soundwave could feel the twins' riveted interest, and tried to ignore it.

"Admonition, previously stated: Decepticon politics not your concern."

"Why does it bother you when I talk about these things? I can't help that I can see and hear, you know. You're not incapable of accepting my help when it suits you, so you might as well listen up."

"Jazz, not a member of surveillance team."

"I'm not?" Jazz switched to walking backward, the better to show off his wounded expression.

"Well, I should be. Think about it: technically, I'm more qualified than you are. I've been spying on Decepticons longer."

"Then answer question: why Jazz incorrect in assessing Shockwave's request?"

"I was off my game," was the slightly terse reply. "If *somebody* hadn't been keeping me from visiting HQ every orn, I'd have had a better grasp on the current politics. Could say the same for you too, actually. Isn't this why you have your twin pests working the consoles in the command room, to keep tabs on your rivals?"

"Rumble and Frenzy, observant," Soundwave answered promptly. "Clever. However, power balance between top Decepticons... complicated."

"Exactly. Which is why you need to..." Halfway through his own sentence, Jazz seemed to lose interest in it. His backward steps slowed, then stopped, and for no reason at all that Soundwave could see, he tilted his head to the side and frowned.

"Jazz?"

"Shh. Do you hear that?"

An ill-defined question. Soundwave could hear many things, more than most mechs, and just now they were surrounded by a cacophony of downtown Iacon. Chatter, growling engines, and the scrape of metal pedes against the walkway crowded into his audial relay.

"Specify sound."

"Oh yeah, I hear that. It's not my imagination." Blue light flared bright with sudden excitement and Jazz dashed away, without so much as a twitch in warning. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw stiffened, minds blank with surprise, not unlike Soundwave's own.

*"Slave, escaping!"* Buzzsaw cried, and lifted off his shoulder to go in pursuit. Though baffled, Soundwave reflexively sent calming pulses through the link.

"Jazz, not escaping," he assured his twins. Already he'd begun to follow, not running, but eating up the distance in long strides. Jazz would never attempt anything so pointless. Anyway, Soundwave sensed Jazz wasn't running from anything so much as *to* it, whatever it was. He trailed Jazz around a corner and watched him weave past a few startled neutrals before finally slowing, coming to a stop in front of a nightspot. Even though it was the middle of the active cycle, it was open for business and thumping music loud enough for anyone outside to hear. When Soundwave caught up, Jazz was placing reverent hands against the club's wall.

"Jazz," he said sharply. "Explain action. Behavior unacceptable."

"I knew I heard it," Jazz said triumphantly. "Can hardly believe it, but my audios wouldn't lie. Earth culture really has taken over this planet, hasn't it? Oh, I could kiss this deejay."

As if he knew that would make Soundwave tense up with displeasure, he tilted his head toward him and grinned. "Relax, love. Don't you hear it? It's the Prince of Pop. Lord of the Dance. The one, the only *Mister – Michael – Jackson*."

He held up a hand before Soundwave could activate his vocalizer. "Stop, shh, don't. You're about to say 'Michael Jackson, not known'. And then I'll have to kill ya. And that'll get messy. So spare us both the hassle and just listen. Absorb the sweet dulcet tones of the man who revolutionized Earth's music scene. And that's just the singing. But his dance... Sigma, the man's feet were twin geniuses. He reinvented the music video with a style of dance that no one had ever conceived, let alone could imitate. He changed the way humans saw, interpreted, and performed dance, and all in the same vorn that we woke up. I consider it fate. It was Michael Jackson who showed me what was possible when it came to dancing, because Primus knows nobody here on Cybertron could have taught me. I memorized all his choreography. Prowl said it would be impossible for anyone of our species to do the moonwalk, but I proved him wrong. See, watch."

Beaming with delight, Jazz demonstrated... something right there on the walkway. Soundwave's processor, reeling to make sense of anything that Jazz just said, was helpless to comprehend it. Lost in bewilderment, he could only stand and stare.

"Not bad, huh? I was worried I'd be out of practice, but I guess you never forget."

Jazz swerved to the side, and then back again, leading with his head, and his spinal struts rippled with such precision that the movement flowed like water. Then he was doing that 'moonwalk' thing again, moving back from Soundwave until he stopped and spun in a tight circle, freezing in perfect



time to the music. On his shoulder, Laserbeak shifted slightly, and Soundwave felt a bright flare of her curiosity. Buzzsaw was still gawping with horrified astonishment.

Singing lightly along with the nonsensical words, Jazz swiveled into some impossible-looking twist and flip combination, and how did a mech even manage to bend like that, let alone in chains that seemed ever-more pointless to put on him? The many gaps in his armor that Hook had mentioned gave Jazz the advantage of incredible flexibility, allowing him to move with a nearly organic fluidity when he wished. The very concept was alien to Soundwave. His own build was a solidly welded frame, a necessity for the security of his charges within. Flexibility was the price he paid for pure strength. He could never do that... thing that Jazz was now doing, and perhaps that's why Laserbeak was suddenly so interested.

Without warning she dropped off his shoulder, coasting a circle around Jazz for a closer look. Preoccupied with a complicated new dance step, Jazz didn't notice at first. But when he looked up and found her hovering just a few steps away, he grinned. Again he performed that odd motion of swerving to the side, head first, and Laserbeak flapped to her left, mirroring his movement. Jazz swerved to his left and she flapped to the right, trying to keep level with him.

Buzzsaw boggled. "*What the...*"

Jazz laughed, clearly amused. When he backed up she moved forward, when he advanced she retreated. He spun and she swirled around him, and when he curved his body into impossible postures she skimmed up along his armor, fluttering counterpoint to his every motion. Frozen to the walkway, Soundwave could only stare. He didn't even realize they'd gathered an audience until the song ended and mechs all around them burst into applause. Not in the least discomfited, Jazz dipped into a low and graceful bow.

"Well now, how 'bout that?" he drawled, upon standing. "Your little girl can *dance*. She gets it from me, I'm sure."

"*Brother, seen that before?*"

Puffing hot air from her vents, Laserbeak alit on the corner of a vendor's table to rest. She wasn't too tired to shoot a good deal of smugness in Buzzsaw's direction, and Buzzsaw could only gape. It was difficult to ignore her delight, but Soundwave was just as acutely conscious of all the attention Jazz had just attracted.

"Jazz, such actions inappropriate. Public display, possibly dangerous."

"Worried the wrong mechs might see? I wasn't. For Jackson, it was worth the risk. Besides, I wasn't expecting a dance partner. I never could resist the charms of a beautiful lady."

Jazz leaned over and tickled lightly under her beak. Flustered feelings fizzed up in Laserbeak, distracting Soundwave. He rapped her with a light admonishment, emphatically backed up by her brother, and tried to focus on Jazz.

"Behavior will not be repeated."

"It's strange how much better I feel," Jazz mused, still idly stroking Laserbeak along the plates of her wings. "I was feeling a little sad this morning, thinking about... things." He directed a very specific look at Soundwave, just to make sure they both knew what he meant. "But now I'm happy. Dancing does that for me. Crazy, huh?"

Soundwave activated his vocalizer but found he had no reply.

"Good, I'm glad we agree. And even though I did just win another point, try not to take it too hard, love. I have a feeling that you like me dancing just as much as I like me dancing. Wait 'til you see what I can do when the chains are off." He winked, and returned to their walk with a little skip in his step. Laserbeak took off to glide above, and Soundwave could see nothing else to do but follow.

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Something was different. Soundwave hesitated in the open doorway of his office, subconsciously perplexed and automatically seeking the cause. He was too attuned to all the sounds in his world to not notice their changes, long habits of survival quietly kicking up an alarm at any unexplained difference. It took him a full astrosecond to figure it out: the entertainment console was silent. Since its unending cacophony of explosions, rattling gunfire, and obnoxious beeping always accompanied the twins' presence in his loft, he was momentarily bewildered.

Jazz was the cause. Poised like an Insecticon between the walls of the far corner, up near the ceiling, he shifted his position slightly and continued to speak.

"... and that's when the guy's gofer came running in, engines all abuzz, to shout that the primary security level had been hacked. 'Sir, there's an intruder, sir! He could be anywhere in the base right now!'"

Rumble and Frenzy were on the edge of the couch, riveted.

"Right underneath you?"

"And they still didn't see?"

"No way!"

"Way," Jazz assured them. "Nobody ever thinks to look up. 'Con gets all hot and bothered, starts screaming at the poor flunky for letting this happen, doesn't even pause to give orders for a search. He is smart enough to put his hand on that datachip, though, and stick it in his own subspace."

"Slag."

"Whadja do? Divebomb him and slit his throat?"

"Nah, not my style. Besides, he was twice as big as me and had three underlings in the room. Waiting would have to be the name of this game."

"You couldn't stay up in the corner like that forever, though, your fuel lines would cramp up for sure."

"Oh you'd be surprised how long I can hang here, happy as a Seeker in a cloud. But I didn't have to wait long. After he finished blaming everyone in the room, he ordered them all out and got on the comms. If he hadn't been yellin' so loud to all the base that they'd better bring him 'the filthy bot spy', he might have heard me do this."

Jazz dropped to the floor in such a tight, graceful roll that hardly a sound could be heard. While Rumble and Frenzy oohed and ahed, he slunk around behind the couch.

"Gotcha!" They squealed and giggled when Jazz popped up over the back of the couch.

"Fragging awesome."

"I could *see* you and I still didn't hear you coming."

"Then you slit his throat, right?"

"Tall as he was, it wasn't a sure thing I'd hit the ambulatory cable. I settled for slashing him across the back of the knee joints instead." Jazz tipped over the edge of the couch and slid upside down between the twins, whose optics shone with morbid fascination.

"Wicked."

"He wasn't so impressed. Never heard anyone scream at a pitch that high. Too bad for him he left the basewide comm channel open, because every soldier there heard him cry like a stuck turbofox. I ripped open his subspace and took what I was after, rigged the command console for self-destruct, and went on my merry way. Nobody gave much chase; I suspect they were rushing up to the command room to save their C.O. because they thought he was dying. How unfortunate that the power supply to the door keypad had been cut, delaying their rescue. Would have given a cube of the good stuff to be able to see their faces when they found him."

Soundwave remembered the incident less fondly. If this was the particular officer he was thinking of, that would certainly explain why his unit slowly imploded over the course of a vorn. For some reason that no one in high command knew, his soldiers just stopped respecting him.

"Rumble, Frenzy. Suggestion: find alternate activity now."

"Aww, Soundwave." Their heads jerked up with surprise; they hadn't noticed him enter the room, though he suspected Jazz had. "But we're having fun!"

"Yeah, Jazz has lots of cool stories."

"Reminder: victims in story, Decepticons."

They shrugged, half-sparked guilt washing through the link. "They're still cool to listen to."

"Yeah, Soundwave," Jazz drawled, still upside down on the couch and grinning lazily at him.

"They're cool. You should listen too. Don't you want to know how that unit out by the rift managed to 'accidentally' blow itself up?"

"Negative. Only current interest, hax game."

"Borrring."

"Rumble and Frenzy, not required to play."

"You always hog Jazz!"

"If bored, recommend visit to Hook. Maintenance check overdue."

Both twins flinched. "That again?"

"Hook pulls fraggin' hard when he checks fuel lines. It hurts."

"Visit under my supervision necessary?"

They slumped into the cushions.

"No."

"We'll go tomorrow."

"Promise given. According visit expected."

They muttered grudging assent, and Soundwave turned his attention to the one in the middle. "Jazz, come."

"Hai, hai." He dropped his hands flat to the floor and tipped over backward onto his feet. His movements were as smooth and fluid as ever, but Soundwave decided he would take Jazz to see Hook tomorrow as well. He might as well have all his property on the same maintenance schedule.

*"Shitto fukai?"* Jazz asked sweetly. *"Jealous?"*

"Negative." Soundwave tried to put out of his mind the image of Jazz playfully cozying up between Rumble and Frenzy, and nudged him toward their hax table.

*"If you say so, love."*

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Call it *shitto fukai*, jealous, or any other word, it wasn't quite the truth. Soundwave wasn't about to be jealous of Laserbeak dancing with Jazz, or the twins cuddling up with him, because he could not be jealous of his own possessions. Everyone belonged to him in the end. It was just that it was so unexpected. The usual trend was for a new acquisition to develop trust and affection with him first, then gradually develop those same feelings for the new siblings. Leave it to Jazz to buck a trend. Odd twists such as these were Soundwave's reminders that it was no symbiote cassette model climbing into his berth, but a fully independent vehicle model and one, moreover, with a lifetime of slippery espionage experience behind him. Would he ever understand how his slave's mind worked? If he looked inside, then would he know?

Jazz had been in the process of lying down, but he froze when Soundwave's hands glided over his shoulder cuffs and down his arms, keeping him upright.

"In a mood for more than spooning, huh? Been a while."

The lightness of his tone did nothing to hide his nervousness. Soundwave had not attempted anything intimate with Jazz since before the truth came out, but tonight he didn't feel like repressing his urges. Jazz was his, after all.

"Concern, Jazz sore after demonstration."

"What, after a klik or two up on the wall? It's nothin'. You don't have to worry."

"Hush. Remain still."

Jazz fidgeted a little, but he didn't try to pull away from Soundwave's gentle massage. He even, Soundwave guessed from the relaxation stealing into his frame, enjoyed it. His hands glided up and down Jazz's body, kneading the tender joints, and every now and then a small moan of delight escaped Jazz's vocalizer. When he finished, he caught Jazz once again as he tried to lie back down.

"Now what?" He made a small, unhappy noise when Soundwave lifted Jazz's hand to his own chest. "Oh."

"Reciprocation, expected. Touch here, pleasing." Soundwave demonstrated by gliding Jazz's hand over his rotator cuffs, then along one edge of his chest glass. He wanted Jazz to show him affection, but even though Jazz did not pull his hand away, he grimaced and shuttered his visor.

Soundwave caught his chin with his other hand. "Online vision."

"What do you care if I look or not? I'm not fighting you."

"Theory: Jazz finds me ugly?"

For once, he actually seemed to catch Jazz by surprise. His visor snapped back online, and he looked right at Soundwave.

"What? No, I- you're not ugly, Soundwave." His expression twisted into something sour. "It's that smear of purple death on your chest that's ugly. Megatron likes to make me kiss it. Do you want the same?"

Soundwave's processor all-too-obligingly furnished an image, and he tried to banish the thought by returning his attention to Jazz. Past experiences had frightened him, therefore Soundwave must soothe his fears.

"Designation, Soundwave," he reminded Jazz, briefly cupping his face in comfort. A silent command brought the lights down to just a soft glow. When he was sure Jazz was watching, he covered the Decepticon sigil on his chest with his own hand. "Now, not ugly?"

Jazz stared at him in astonishment.

"Reciprocation expected," Soundwave prompted, then, after a nanoklik, added, "Hoped for."

That seemed to trigger something in Jazz. Stiffly, as if handling an explosive, he lifted his hands to Soundwave's body. Nervous fingertips played over his transformation seams, sending multiple thrills through him, then moved up to his shoulder joint. His hand pressed into it, in imitation of Soundwave's massage, kneading the wires just a little before withdrawing again. He nodded to show approval, and Jazz repeated the move.

Warmth spread through Soundwave's frame, a delicious relaxation easing through his hydraulics. As many times as he'd done this for his symbiotes, they were not able to do the same for him. They were too small, or didn't have the proper dexterity. Now Jazz's hands left a trail of pleasure wherever they moved, pressing and rubbing with increasing confidence. His ventilations slowed, becoming deeper and more even, and he could feel systems preparing for shutdown. This felt wonderful.

Jazz stifled a small gasp when Soundwave gathered him close to his chest, and lay back down onto the berth. He didn't try to squirm free, but through their armor Soundwave could feel his systems humming at high speed.

"Reciprocation, appreciated," he murmured, sweeping his palm lightly over the helm tucked just under his chin. "Performance, pleasing."

"Soundwave, my love, you know how I live for those words."

A tiny sigh escaped Soundwave's vents. Held fast to his own body and still Jazz could make himself

be so far away. How would Soundwave ever reach out and grab him for good? What would it take to really catch him? Perhaps he should look inside that mind after all?

Idly Soundwave toyed with Jazz's audio sensor, which he knew was extremely sensitive, and Jazz twitched.

Maybe someday. Soundwave was in no hurry. Jazz was his, and he had all the time in the universe.

---

"So idiocy can be undone. Praise to Primus."

Patiently Jazz let his face be turned one way to the other, his chin held firmly in Hook's unrelenting grip. He peered closer, and Soundwave could hear the tiny clicks of advanced optical lenses magnifying his vision.

"A few old scars, but the self repair's taken care of most of his plating. Systems sound clean, and this time he's actually standing up straight. Follow my finger, slave." Hook held up a finger and moved it back and forth before Jazz's visor.

"Why, is it leading the escape from Decepticons?"

"Attitude still intact, I see. I guess I couldn't ask for miracles. Runt, get over here."

"Yes, master!"

First Aid, who had been all but quivering with hope from the moment they walked in the door, sprang eagerly from his corner.

"Bot has a history of malnutrition, ineffective recharge, and frequent beatings. What are his risks?"

"Weakened firewalls, lowered immunity from viruses, uneven self-repair, misaligned hydraulics and, uh, impaired sensors."

"What do I want to test today?"

"Fuel valves' efficiency, firewall resiliency, joint range, reflexes, vision, hearing, air filter efficiency and excess residue, and the sparkpulse."

"And?" Hook lifted a threatening hand, and First Aid cringed.

"And armor resiliency! Test it for regeneration since institution of proper diet!"

"That's more like it."

He settled for a mild cuff against First Aid's helm, and stepped back from Jazz. "Take him in to sub-bay 2 and get started. I am *timing* you so don't you dare dawdle."

"Yes, master. Thank you, master."

First Aid bowed and then practically leaped upon Jazz's arm, tugging him to a smaller glass-walled room. Jazz was nearly yanked off his feet, but he tripped along obediently after the Autobot with a laugh. He did not look back.

"Cheers the kid up when I let him work on the other bots," grunted Hook, now rummaging for a new tool. "I'll review his work when he's done, but I promise you he's capable of performing the necessary tests."

"Autobot's proficiency, not a concern. Your judgement, respected."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, because he did the check-ups on your twin midgets this morning. Hope you don't mind."

Soundwave checked his audial relay for any glitching. He had not expected the twins to keep their word; they never had. "Rumble, Frenzy, visited medbay? Without force?"

Hook was picking through probes arranged on a cart, and rolled his optics. "They did, not that I knew about it at first. Little sneaks sneaked right past me, cornered my slave, and had the brass bearings to order him to do their maintenance. Seems somebody tipped them off that he doesn't yank on the fuel lines so hard. Wimps."

Ah. "Situation, understood."

"We'll be done here in about a joor. Will you wait?"

"Negative. Surveillance report requires completion. Contact when ready."

"Will do, sir." Soundwave turned, casting one last glance in the direction of the Autobots as he did so. Despite Hook's threat, First Aid wasn't rushing to begin maintenance. Instead he just clung to Jazz, while Jazz rubbed little soothing circles into his back.

"At least I don't have to worry about joint problems," Hook spoke up, not noticing Soundwave's momentary hesitation. "Since I know you've been following my advice. Everyone around here knows about the quiet blue Decepticon that walks the market, him and his 'dancing slave'. Glad to hear you're getting out of the house more often, sir."

To this Soundwave gave no comment. He looked away from Jazz and his admirer, and left in silence.

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Jazz paid for it later in the washracks, jumping and whirling around with a quite satisfying yelp.

"Ouch! What was that for?" Hand over his shoulder cuff, where Soundwave had not-so-accidentally pinched a nerve wire, he backed away and glared.

"Physical contact with Autobot, displeasing. In future, more distance expected."

"Wha- you mean today in the medbay? You pinched me for a *hug*? Are you serious? Don't answer that, you're always serious. Soundwave, what do you expect when you've kept me locked up here and away from my friends for half an ice age? They miss me; I miss them."

"Jazz, mine." He grasped Jazz by the chin, and Jazz jerked his head free with a contemptuous toss.

"Jealous idiot. What do you think I'm going to do to the poor kid, anyway? Toss him onto the berth and have my way with him because what, nothing better to do? I'd say he gets enough of that from Hook as it is."

Hot air huffed out of Soundwave's vents. Logically, he knew it was highly improbable that Jazz would engage in intimacy with another slave. His possessive instincts were harder to convince.

"More appropriate distance expected in future," he repeated stiffly.

"You mean, you don't like to watch me get cozy with other bots? Skywarp liked it a little too much. I could tell you all about -"

"Similarities to Skywarp, zero. Now, Jazz mine. Distance expected."

"That's not somethin' I can settle for, Soundwave."

"This subject, not a negotiation," Soundwave answered, feeling a touch of exasperation. Jazz just looked up at him through streaming hot solvent, damnably unintimidated.

"It might not be a lot of comfort, when we have our time together, but it's something. A small hug, a simple touch - some kind of contact that isn't a promise of pain or rape. And it's all we have left. Examine that chunk of ice you call a spark and ask yourself if you really have to take that away."

"Order given."

Jazz's vents opened wide, and over the hiss of water against metal Soundwave could hear him cycling through a full exhalation. He hadn't given up, and Soundwave prepared for more fussing.

"Okay, how 'bout just this?" Without any warning whatsoever, Jazz slipped his hand into Soundwave's and held it, just as naturally as Soundwave had seen him do with his Autobot friends. Soundwave was so startled, he stared at their hands in silence.

"Easy right?" Jazz said breezily, swinging their hands a little for some demonstration. "Doesn't mean a thing. Can I at least just do this? I promise I won't touch them any other way, not even a hug, but please let me have this much."

His hand was smaller than Soundwave's, but warm and comfortably clasped with his own. Such a pointless, absurd act, but his systems were running just a little hotter than they were a breem ago. "Permission granted."

"Thank you, master." He grinned cheekily and pulled his hand clear, but not before he pressed Soundwave's hand to his lips for a light kiss. Then he turned his attention to rinsing off, as if he'd done nothing unusual.

"You know I'd say your jealousy was kinda cute, if you were capable of being cute, which of course you're not. You're much too dark and scary for that."

"Jealousy inaccurate. Possessive, accurate."

"Potato, potahto, my love."

Whatever that was supposed to mean, Soundwave decided he didn't care. In silent change of subject, he pressed the brush into Jazz's hands for his own bathing session. Jazz had almost finished



slathering him in foam when a new, more troubling thought occurred to Soundwave.

"Jazz, told him?"

"Told who what?"

"Autobot medic. You know what."

"Ah. That." Jazz's smile faded and he swept a thumb pensively across the bristles. "That's a very good question."

"Told him?"

"Don't bother getting in a panic over it, Soundwave, I didn't say anything. I should have, mind you. Aid needs to know, they all need to know. Whatever else you Cons take from us, we still have the right to mourn our dead." He flicked his wrist, spattering soap across Soundwave's chest. "But I couldn't. He was so excited to see me. I couldn't kill that smile."

Jazz sighed and rested a hand against his chest glass. "It makes me less mad at you, I have to admit. It really is a hard story to tell, isn't it?"

"Agreed." He cupped a hand against Jazz's face, and felt the small thrill of acceptance when Jazz leaned into the touch. If only it could always be like this. Why did it seem that the moments Jazz felt closest must always be tied to the cassettibot deaths?

In the end, he reflected, maybe that was as much as he deserved.

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Dancing in the Street, by The Pumpkin Spice



## on politics

Another work cycle, another attempt to present himself at Decepticon High Command. This time, Soundwave resolved firmly, nothing would go wrong. He would keep Jazz in the same room as himself, which doubled as a chance to keep an optic on him and also let Jazz see his precious Autobot friends. A privilege for which in return, as he'd lectured Jazz three times already, he was expected to keep his mouth shut around Megatron.

He said it a fourth time now, hand clamping down on Jazz's shoulder before he keyed open the door. "Jazz, reminder."

"I know, I know. Say nothing to Megatron, no matter what his insult, no matter how much better my comeback would have been. And it would have been better."

"Jazz."

"But, I guess we'll never know. Just open the door so I can check on Bluestreak, please. It's been so long already."

Soundwave shot Jazz a stern look but proceeded to tap in the code, allowing them entrance. Barely had Jazz put one pede across the threshold, though, before he winced and hesitated.

"Uh-oh. That is one seriously hostile glare. Do you suppose Starscream is still just a teeny bit angry about what happened that day of the rain?"

Soundwave risked a glance up. Sure enough, Starscream stood up there by the rail on the top level, seething visibly even from here. Telepathy or not, anyone could have sensed the pure malice swirling around him like smoke. Optics zeroed in on Soundwave, smoldering with hate.

"Starscream, irrelevant," Soundwave replied calmly, though very very quietly. Starscream's glares had never bothered Soundwave and they never would, though he didn't much like the way that glare moved on to Jazz. Gently he nudged Jazz into the room. "Your concern, good behavior. Appropriate behavior."

"No bots closer than venting distance, check. Worry more about who you might touch rather than me, darling; some species of Starscream can transmit poison upon contact. I heard it, so it must be true."

"Hush." Soundwave had to shoo his grinning slave into the corner, where Perceptor and Bluestreak lit up like a power grid at the very sight of Jazz. Bluestreak, clumsily hindered by his chains, tried to jump up to greet Jazz, and Jazz put a restraining hand against his shoulder to keep him down. Instead he slipped in gracefully between them, making sure not to touch either, and leaned over to whisper something into Perceptor's audio. He had the nerve to glance sideways at Soundwave and smile as he did this, and whatever he said caused Perceptor to look at Soundwave with surprise, then pity.

Impertinent slave. Soundwave didn't wait to see the same look on Bluestreak's face but stomped irritably up the steps, ready to concentrate on simply working for a little while. Starscream, of course, had no intention of letting that happen.

"Hello, Soundwave. Standing on your own alright, without Jazz to prop you up?"

Soundwave ignored him and went straight to Megatron, bowing respectfully. "Lord Megatron."

"Hmm? Oh, Soundwave." Megatron looked to be absorbed in some report, deep and thoughtful scowl etched on his faceplates. He spared Soundwave a single glance. "What do you want?"

"Want, inaccurate. Present only to work."

"You're the only one," Megatron grunted, and flicked a dismissive hand. Soundwave took the cue and retreated to his console, where Frenzy already sat.

*"Hey boss!" he chirped. "Heads up, Starscream's -"*

"Soundwave."

*"- in a mood."*

Starscream's hand splayed flat against Soundwave's monitor, blocking his view. Soundwave waited just a moment before looking up.

"What, not even a word of greeting for your fellow officer? And after such a long time, too. You really are such a stranger in these halls."

"Suggestion, remove hand."

*"Too busy to put a look in on Headquarters, but never too busy for shopping in the streets, oh I like that. I suppose it is more important to entertain the crowds with your dancing slave." Practically sitting on Soundwave's console, Starscream leaned in dangerously close. "Gossip moves fast in Iacon, Soundwave, and Seekers love gossip. Everyone knows you never venture out of your cave without your pet Autobot at hand. I can only assume you need him to spring to your defense often, though how you managed to train him to do that is something I'll never know. Practice? You do seem to have a thing for collecting insolent upstarts."*

Starscream shot a pointed look at Frenzy, who knew what was going on and was relentlessly ping-ponging Soundwave to patch him in on the frequency. Soundwave remained silent.

*"What I do know is that you should be more careful with the lenience you grant him. Let him wander too far off that leash, and someone else could snatch him up. Skywarp was careless that night, and you were lucky. But I'm always fixing Skywarp's careless mistakes."*

Soundwave stiffened, just barely, and finally spoke. *"Your threats, no concern."*

*"If you that's what you prefer to think."*

"Query," Soundwave said aloud, impatiently, "your own work, unnecessary?"

"My work is always necessary," Starscream replied loftily. "But not right now. I have to stay here so that when Shockwave comes in to argue for that proposal Megatron's reading, I can argue against it. If you know what's good for you, you will too."

"Proposal contents?"

"I don't know. But it's Shockwave's proposal, so I'm sure it's wrong."

With a smirk and a flick of the wing, Starscream pranced off to annoy something else. Soundwave took the opportunity to perform a full vent cycle, and Frenzy was finally allowed contact.

*"What the pit was that all about?"*

*"Starscream, seeking retaliation. Moderate caution advised."*

*"Starscream's always makin' noise. Why are you so tense?"*

Soundwave tamped down his unease through long experience of controlling his emotions.

*"Starscream's threats, only words. Not a concern. Continue work."*

*"Kay, if you say so."*

Frenzy went back to punching buttons, and Soundwave took the opportunity to glance between the rails. True to his word, Jazz was clasping the hands of the Autobots on each side and nothing more. He must have been watching the command level, though; they made optic contact right away. Cheerily Jazz grinned, and blew him a light kiss.

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Shockwave's proposal, it turned out, was to designate some empire resources for the upcoming mid-vorn. A proper demonstration, he argued, with a parade and laser displays, was exactly the sort of celebration the healing planet needed. It would be a show of the new government's prosperity, while serving to remind the civilian population who was responsible for the return to peace that made mid-vorn celebrations even possible.

Starscream promptly threw a tantrum that was something of a laser display all on its own. Fuel was too precious, he screeched, and too many other vital projects had been kept waiting in line, for the Decepticon empire to indulge in silly parties. Shockwave's proposal was a ridiculous waste of resources.

"He has something of a point, Shockwave," Megatron mused, tapping one finger against the arm of his chair. "It will be expensive. Why should I waste a lot of good fuel on mecha that weren't even brave enough to fight my war?"

"It is precisely those mecha that must be kept in mind, my lord." Shockwave's lone optic glowed intensely, a look that Soundwave knew meant he was glaring hatefully at Starscream. "The former neutrals do not carry the same automatic loyalty to you that *most* of your own Decepticon soldiers do." Another obvious glance at Starscream. "An Imperial celebration is just the sort of cure for such doubting sparks."

Megatron's optics flared like embers. "Not carry the same loyalty? Is there sedition in this city that I haven't been informed of?"

"An excellent question, Lord Megatron," Starscream chimed in. "Why don't we ask our Director of Surveillance? Soundwave, have any of your pes- I mean, has your team heard any hint of disloyalty to our leader?"

"Negative," Soundwave answered promptly. "Lord Megatron, extremely popular amongst Iacon population. References in conversation, favorable." It was, of course, only the truth, just as Soundwave entailed in his daily reports. There was no reason to state anything else. He got a nasty look of his own from Shockwave, anyway.

"There, you see?" Starscream postured triumphantly. "You don't need to win over the dumb masses after all."

Slight emphasis on *dumb* had Megatron shooting Starscream a rather arch look, but he let the veiled insult pass.

"Of course they are loyal to you," Shockwave said smoothly. "You are their savior who brought peace and fuel to the planet. But the empire itself is new, and the mecha are still learning they can look to it for protection and guidance. Past experience has taught them that lavish celebrations are the hallmark of a prosperous, stable government. The old Council regularly sponsored new-vorn and mid-vorn celebrations here in Iacon. Politicians traveled down the avenues in long parades, waving to their subjects, adored by all."

Soundwave picked up a near-inaudible hiss of irritation on Starscream's part. He was not surprised. Shockwave was no fool, and knew exactly how to persuade Megatron; the argument was over the moment he brought up the old Councillors. Megatron would never pass up a chance to bask in the glory that used to be theirs.

"I think we can spare a few fuel drums for a little something, Starscream. Shockwave is right, this is our first peaceful mid-vorn in centuries. It would be a shame not to acknowledge it properly. Let's discuss the budget, and my parade, in a little more detail."

What followed was an argument more vicious and heated than any argument Soundwave could remember hearing throughout the whole war. Battlefield strategy was apparently far less controversial than *budget allocation*. Starscream fought Shockwave cannon to claw on every small point, to which Shockwave responded with his usual frozen condescension. Both mechs pestered him relentlessly for support, but Soundwave had no preferred outcome and therefore no opinion, which left them both irritated at him. It was an altogether unpleasant and exhausting alternative to a quiet game of hax.

"Poor baby," Jazz commiserated at his feeding time, in the privacy of his office. "They're sockin' it to you left and right in there. You're not even trying to guard! Keep your fists up, and try a little dodge-and-weave. Works wonders." He opened his mouth for the energon treat, amusement sparkling in his visor.

"Reminder, here because Jazz considered it wise."

"Reminder, you obviously agreed. Don't go blaming your current misery on me, it's not my fault. Decepticon command is made up of egocentric powermongers. Which isn't to say I'm not enjoying the show, because from my point of view it's fabulous entertainment. Shockwave's going to win in overtime, by the way. He has the patience. Starscream is uh... how else to put it? Flighty. He'll get fed up with the whole argument, throw up his hands, and screech, 'Fine, so be it! Waste our precious fuel on your party, see if I care. Now can we talk about my ideas?' I'm waitin' for it."

Soundwave had no reply to this, since he knew it was perfectly true, and let out a tiny sigh. Was it a little treasonous, he wondered, to prefer the company of his own Autobot to his fellow Decepticons?

"Better get back in there, love. Headquarters might go up in flames. And that would be no bad thing, except my friends are still back there."

Soundwave gathered Jazz in his arms and held him close to his chest, drawing peace from his closeness. And then there was no choice but to return to the command room.

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"Fine!" Starscream snarled, engines revving sharply. "So be it! Waste Earth's fuel on your ridiculous party, see if I care. But if you're willing to not throw all of it away, I do have a few important projects that need discussion. Can we move on already?"

Distantly, in the lower corner of the room, Soundwave heard Jazz clear his vocalizer. Shockwave rocked back a little on his hydraulics, chest puffing out, looking quite pleased with himself.

"I am happy to have your support for my mid-vorn project, Commander Starscream, I'm sure you will not regret it. By all means, update us on the current status of your projects. By my lord Megatron's leave, of course."

Megatron shifted in his chair, a cross between restless and bored. "Yes, get on with it, Starscream. And try not to waste too much of my time."

Starscream glowered, and jammed a datachip into the holograph table with such force Soundwave thought he'd splinter the port. Instead, images and charts popped up in a medley of complicated graphics, and rapidly Starscream made his selections. The project chosen was, of course, the one that was dearest to his sparkchamber, the still-nonexistent science academy. In spite of 'lack of any kind of reasonable support', he'd at least designed a curriculum best suited to Cybertron's current needs, and assembled a logistics plan for enrollment and supplies. He'd also chosen a location, though Soundwave noted he was careful not to mention where.

"I realize, oh wise leader, that you are reluctant to supply fuel to my academy because you don't think the return on investment will be good or swift enough. But if I can train even a handful of competent assistants, the payoff for Cybertron could be immeasurable. One of my first projects will be to set up a lab on Earth, studying the method by which we refine energon. Earth's organic fossil fuels are not like any resource we've dealt with before, and it's a theory of mine that we haven't fully explored their potential. Warfare kept us from studying their cellular structure to any great degree, but now we finally have an opportunity. I could revolutionize our entire fuel economy!"

Megatron tapped his chin thoughtfully. "No."

"No?" Starscream looked at Megatron blankly, like he'd never heard the word before. "What do you mean, no? Did I not just adequately describe -"

"You did, for an unfortunately long time. I like my answer better, it's no. Short, simple, easy to understand."

"But the payoff could-"

"I don't care about *could* and *maybe* and those other words you scientists use to decorate your failures. I will not sign off on civilians residing on Earth."

"You're happy enough to leave the Stunticons there -"

"The Stunticons are my soldiers. They're loyal, know their job, and do it well. If you think I'll allow you to establish a colony of your own on Earth, full of mechs with nothing to do but muck about with my fuel in doomed experiments, you are more deluded than I thought. The answer is no."

"My experiments are not doomed!"

"You are, if you don't stop whining about what's been decided. And so is your entire precious academy."

Another small sigh escaped Soundwave. Starscream was in top form today; in no time another fierce argument whipped up, and showed no signs of abating. He and Megatron barked insults at one another for a while, moved on to shredding each other's policies, and at last touched on the next of Starscream's projects: dismantling and moving the space bridge from its current location in southwest America to the Decepticon wells in the middle east.

Megatron said no to that too. While Starscream waxed into a fresh rage, Soundwave checked his chronometer. Another joor was dwindling to a close, and Jazz must be fed. Supposing he was unable to get away this time? Jazz would go hungry.

"Suggestion," he spoke up, as the last breem ticked away and Megatron and Starscream had both paused for ventilation. "Short recess preferable, rest necessary for clear thinking."

Megatron latched onto the idea right away, which Soundwave predicted. He'd been growing more restless throughout the second joor, twitching with a warrior's desire to get up and move. "Excellent idea, Soundwave. My audios could certainly use the break. Slave!"

Starscream hissed and glared at Soundwave, but he too whirled around and stomped away, following Megatron down the steps. Shockwave trailed them at a more sedate pace.

"Ugh, good save, boss." Frenzy leaned back in his seat and luxuriated in a full stretch. "Even though I know that's not why you said it. Ya know, not that I'm arguing against a break from Screamer's screamin', but I could have fed Jazz for you."

"Negative. Only I feed Jazz."

"Fi~ine."

Soundwave descended to the low-clearance floor, where Perceptor and Bluestreak were already scurrying about to serve energon to their masters. He waited until Jazz had placed a cube in Shockwave's expectant claws.

"Jazz," he said quietly. "Come."

He had hoped for an inconspicuous exit, but Starscream was determined to ruin every moment of this day. Jazz drifted to his side, and Soundwave had just turned for the door, when Starscream spoke up in a loud, clear voice.

"There you go again, sneaking off with your slave. I knew I wasn't imagining it. Where do you keep disappearing to, and is it that much better than refueling with your fellow officers?"

Soundwave hesitated, but Jazz didn't miss a beat. "To make out in the cleaning drones closet, Starscream," he answered brightly, "and I don't like to brag, but yes, it is."

Soundwave's hand tightened around Jazz's arm in warning, but Jazz just flashed him a smile. "*¿Qué?*" he asked innocently. "*What? You didn't say anything about Starscream.*"

A low chuckle caught Soundwave's attention. Megatron's cube was almost at his lips, but over the rim Soundwave recognized a flicker of amusement in his optics. Starscream, for his part, was obviously startled by Jazz's answer, but he hastily sketched a sneer on his face.

"Well well, Soundwave. Didn't think you had it in you. Really; none of us thought you did,



actually, have anything in there. But I suppose Jazz does bring out the best of us in the berth. I should know. He can do such remarkable things with his glossa."

Jazz's vents hitched just slightly, a sound covered by Megatron's outright laughter. "Such an enthusiastic slave," Starscream continued maliciously, smirking away. "You'd almost think he enjoyed himself."

"Right," Jazz muttered. "I've had enough of him for the day. Oh, Starscream! Don't sell yourself so short." He leaned back against Soundwave's frame, arching his back coyly. "You're lots of fun in the berth, always enjoy my time with you... or at least I would if you weren't always shouting *Megatron's* name when you overload."

The entire command room went dead quiet, all save for Starscream's abbreviated squeak. Suddenly Megatron wasn't laughing, but his optics fixed on Starscream with a hungry gleam.

"Starscream." His voice was a low purr. "Come over here."

Starscream whipped around, wings twitching like mad. "Don't you listen to that filthy little Autobot, Megatron, he lies -"

"Starscream." The purr darkened just a little. "I said, come here. I know where we can continue our... discussion."

Soundwave's attention shifted to his hand, which for the second time Jazz was holding with his own. "You ready to get out of here?" he asked, grinning like mad. "I know I am."

"Affirmative." Soundwave let his fingers lace through Jazz's, and together they fled.

---

Jazz turned a few cartwheels in the market, scattering the closest of the vendors. "Ahh, that's better. I can move again! Not complaining, of course, I was happy to get the chance to check up on Percy and Blue, but I don't think anyone can call a round of admin meetings at Decepticon HQ *fun*. I'm glad it's over; now we can pick it apart into itty bitty details. Who do you want to shred first, Shockwave or Starscream?"

"Discussion of Decepticon officers, not appropriate."

"Soundwave, Soundwave. How many times must we go over this? I saw and heard everything just like you did, and nothing you say can keep me from analyzing it. It's up to you if you want to chime in or not, but c'mon, you know you want to." Jazz pecked playfully against his armor before skipping ahead a few steps. "Fine, if you don't have a preference, we'll go in order. Cyclops first. Not really a party kind of mech, wouldn't you agree? Why do you suppose he's so eager to blow a lot of valuable fuel on something like the mid-vorn?"

Soundwave glanced at the crowds flowing around them. "Shockwave's intimation: Megatron must ensure popularity. Incorrect."

"So how about Shockwave's popularity? How's he doin' in the polls?"

Soundwave reviewed his personal memory files of the last several surveillance reports.  
"Shockwave, rarely mentioned in conversation."

"Your reputation precedes you, love. Iaconians know better than to go around shouting about how much they hate a top Decepticon officer. But I guarantee you they hate him. Watch this: look, everybody! It's Shockwave!"

Jazz raised his vocalizer to top volume and every vendor in audioshot froze, then scrambled to hide merchandise and credits in subspace. "Oh, never mind, it was just some pile of ugly crates with a spare optic lying on top. Sorry!"

He turned back to Soundwave with a wicked grin, unconcerned with the dirty looks several mechs sent his way. "See?"

"Point?" Soundwave asked wryly.

"Megatron and Starscream are glamorous war heroes. Shockwave is the afthat that's been governing Cybertron ever since Megatron forced the Autobots offplanet. And if the locals didn't already have plenty of reasons to hate him by the time the war ended, he made extra sure of it by taking control of the economy. All these mecha, scraping to make a living off selling Earth imports, have to pay him for the privilege of bringing shipments through the space bridge. If they don't hide and hoard what they earn, he'll just demand more of it. On the other end of the scale, he uses his status as governor to aid the wealthiest neutrals in getting their factories up and running - again, in exchange for kickbacks. Megatron looks the other way because Shockwave is handy at keeping the city running like it should, and what does he care if Shockwave is now the wealthiest mech on the planet? Megatron cares more about power than credits anyway. So Shockwave got his riches, at the cost of also being the most hated mech on Cybertron."

"Your intimation: Shockwave seeking to increase his own popularity with mid-vorn celebration."

"Bingo." Jazz poked him squarely in the center of the chest. "What do you suppose Megatron would do if he knew this?"

Soundwave considered this. "Strong likelihood, no action. Some duplicity from officers expected; Shockwave's actual statements, not a lie."

"He wouldn't even be a little bit angry?"

"Strong disapproval likely. Private censure, almost certain. However, irrelevant observation. Megatron now enthusiastic for mid-vorn celebration. Speculation regarding Shockwave will be dismissed; informant, lectured or punished."

"So you won't be the bad guy that rains acid on Megatron's parade."

"Negative. That task, traditionally Starscream's."

"Fair enough," Jazz laughed, and they resumed their walk. "That's okay, anyway. It won't work, there is no way Shockwave can undo centuries of hatred with one party. Who knows, splashing around a lot of energon while these mecha struggle for every cube might even make things worse. I can live with that. Don't care why Shockwave goes up against the wall, just so long as he does."

"Jazz -"

"What, afraid the head of Surveillance will overhear me? Oh wait, that's you. Moving on to Starscream. Now that is almost a crying shame, because I can tell you with total confidence that his

theories about Earth fuel aren't his at all, they're Perceptor's. He was just starting the research back on Earth before Autobot City got hit. I only heard about it once, but I remember. Most boring meeting ever."

"Reason, Perceptor shared theory with Starscream?"

"Oh, who knows. He's a scientist, Starscream's a scientist, they relate on some science-y level. If I asked him, Percy would probably say something about how scientific progress belongs to everyone, blah blah blah. My guess is, Starscream jumped all over it, half because he'd just love to revolutionize the planet's fuel needs, and half because setting up a lab on Earth could get him closer to Skyfire and further from Megatron. Which is, naturally, the exact same reason that Megatron said no. Megatron won't even let him resettle Vos, let alone move to another planet."

Unexpectedly, Jazz snagged the corner pole of some derelict scaffolding and swung around it, blocking Soundwave's path. "Megatron's 'new orders' weren't to stop spying on Starscream, were they?"

Soundwave stared at his slave, surprised that Jazz even remembered that brief exchange. It seemed such a long time ago now. "Negative. Only, be more careful."

"I figured. Megatron doesn't trust Starscream to be out of his sight for more than half a nano. I'd say Starscream brought it on himself, except it's not really just Starscream." Adroitly Jazz hopped up to sit on a crossbar, putting himself at optic level with Soundwave. "How many years now, and still Megatron won't permit any permanent settlements outside Iacon. Won't allow anyone but his own handpicked team on Earth, them and the Autobots to work the wells. He doesn't trust any of you."

"Scarce energy requires congregation of population in one city. Decepticon soldiers most needed on Cybertron, not Earth."

"Maybe those are good reasons but it's not why he's keeping everyone here. It is the trademark of tyrants to keep all their followers in one place, to keep an optic on them. C'mon, Soundwave, you don't have to chant the party line, it's just me. And I know you know what I'm talking about."

"My duty, to follow Megatron's orders." Soundwave held Jazz's chin in a firm grip, to make sure he was paying attention. "Your hope, I will admit treason. Likelihood: zero."

"Oh, Soundwave. I would never try anything so dastardly and underhanded." Jazz favored him with a roguish grin, leaning into his touch rather than fighting it. "But do let me know the nanoklik it starts working."

---

Over the orns since Soundwave brought Jazz into his home, he'd learned to expect the unexpected when it came to his slave. He'd watched Jazz dance with Laserbeak, regale his twins with morbid war stories, and start a tossing match with mangled glitchmice. None of it was wrong, exactly, or disobedient in a way that required punishment. Just different. Sometimes amusing, generally harmless, and always lively, Soundwave was even getting used to it. Jazz's stunts couldn't surprise him anymore, or so he thought. Then came the evening that he stepped out of his office and found Jazz holding court before four fascinated casseticons.

Juggling his cameras. Expensive, delicate, not-easily-replaced surveillance cameras that his crew was *supposed* to be cleaning and sorting, not gazing at wide-opticked as Jazz bounced half a dozen of them off one hand to the other in time to the music blasting out of the entertainment console.

"- and that's when they made me their honorary ringmaster. They tried to give me an elephant to show their gratitude, but I said no, Prowl will never let me keep an elephant. But you can teach me how to juggle! Took a little longer than I thought - it's much harder than dancing - but those guys were good teachers. As you can see."

"Awesome," Rumble said reverently. "You've got, like, six cameras in the air at once! How is that even possible?"

"It's not six, it's seven," Frenzy put in. "Can't you count?"

"Nah, I think it's just six. See? One, two, three- I mean, there's that one and then that one and- ah, frag it! They keep moving around too quick! Jazz, how are you doing that?"

"I can teach you guys, if you want."

"Really?" Rumble and Frenzy lit up, then flinched at a warning cluck from Buzzsaw, the only one who'd noticed Soundwave's presence. "Uh, boss. Hi! We were just..."

"It was Rumble's idea!"

"Fragger!"

"Ah, Soundwave." Jazz beamed at him, while one twin violently whacked the other. "About time. Welcome to the show!"

"Jazz, explain activity."

"Just fulfilling my job expectations."

"Drop cameras."

"All at once? Won't that make a mess?"

"Jazz." Soundwave started closing in, and Jazz backed up a step.

"Oh, very well. Heads up, boys and girls." One after another, he bounced each camera out of circulation, forcing the cassettes to scramble to catch them with either hands or beaks. "But are you sure, master? I could teach you how to juggle. I think you'd be very good."

He kept one small spy camera, rolling it across the back of his hand and catching it with a flick of the wrist before it could fall. These were Soundwave's highly classified cameras, his tools to monitor the mecha of Megatron's empire. And now an Autobot was *playing* with them. He stepped closer, hand outstretched.

"Jazz, give camera."

"Come and get it." He dipped his hand and let the camera roll down his forearm when Soundwave tried to snatch it. "Ooh, too slow! Try again."

"Jazz."

"You're not afraid I'll drop it, are you? I think I've had ample opportunity since coming here to prove

that I am anything but clumsy, so why the nervousness? Soundwave, tell me the truth: do your cameras mean more to you than I do?"

He had the impudence to pretend he was hurt, then gracefully bowed back out of Soundwave's next grab. "No need to get defensive, love! Only a joke; you may have heard of it. Humorous statement, designed to elicit a smile? Some mechs find them funny. Mechs with *personalities*. I can see how it would confuse you."

Jazz twisted out of the way and circled back around Soundwave, still showing off his silly moves with that blasted camera. "Jazz will give camera now."

"Or you'll what?"

Soundwave backed Jazz into the arm of the couch and leaned in close. "Or I target ankle joints."

"Ooh, now you're playing nasty."

"Strategy, effective."

"Well played, *mon cher*." Jazz dropped the tiny camera into Soundwave's waiting hand. "But you know, I really do think you stress too much over this job. We should take a vacation, go to Earth, see a circus. The kids'll love it."

"Visiting circus unnecessary, circus apparently already here." Soundwave snagged Jazz's wrist when he tried to roll away to the side. "Command: stop corrupting my symbiotes."

"Can't help myself, master, they're so much easier to corrupt than you."

Jazz shot him one of his saucy grins, and then the light shifted behind his visor. When Soundwave turned, he found himself looking at four eager stares, all his casseticons on the edge of their respective seats. Laserbeak clicked, and he caught the phrase *mating dance* in her thoughts.

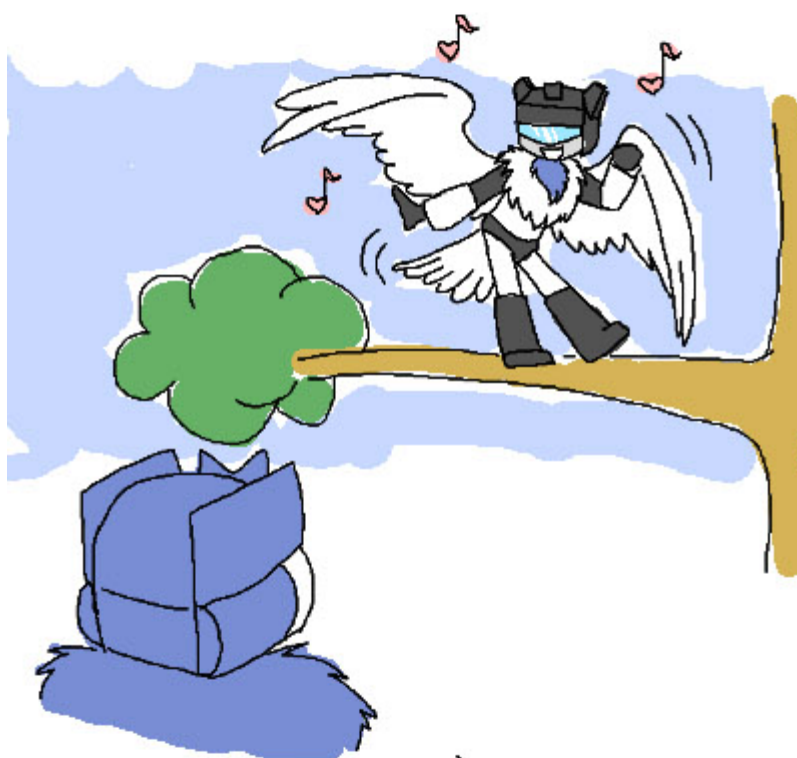
"Your chores, incomplete. Suggestion, return attention to work."

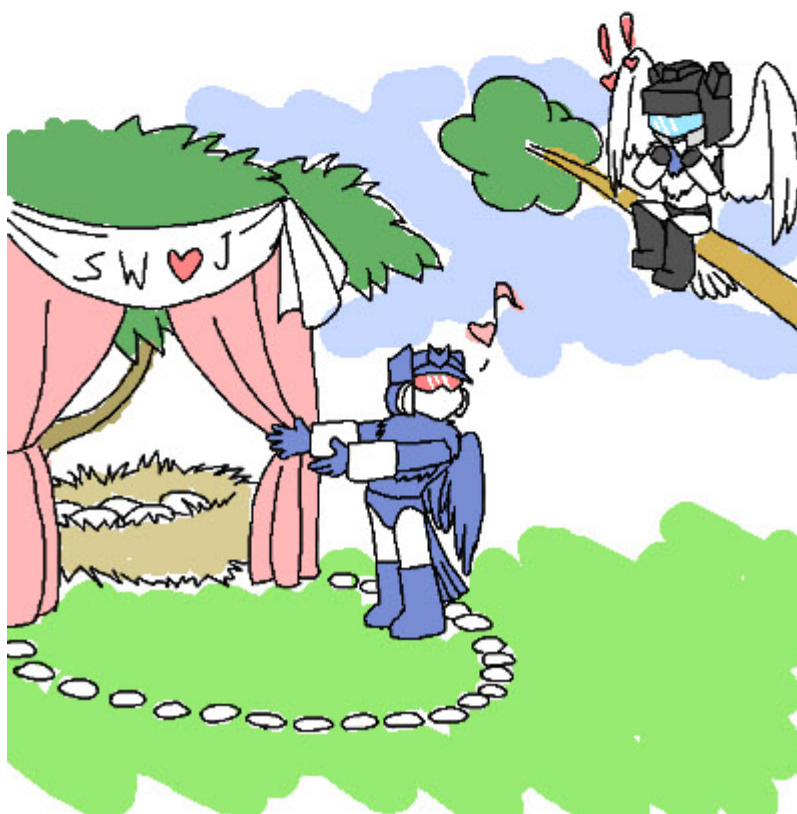
Everyone stammered something and rapidly busied themselves with tending to the cameras like they should have been doing in the first place. Soundwave set the last one with the others, pretending not to hear Jazz's snicker. Tonight, probably, he would target Jazz's ankles after all.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters







## on castoffs

The pace of the city seemed to be accelerating as the mid-vorn approached. Now when Jazz and Soundwave walked their route, they had to avoid squads of bots sweeping through the streets. Shockwave was determined that the city - at least those parts of the city that Megatron would see - look nothing less than perfect, and for a cube of energon the ghettodwellers were roving the streets, gathering trash and scrubbing off soot. In the market, Jazz watched some of them hassle the vendors into packing up their merchandise so it wouldn't sit on the walk.

"Careful," he remarked dryly, "a mech sitting still for two klicks might find himself getting swept up and tossed onto Long Haul's flatbed. Where's all this undesirable trash going, anyway?"

Laserbeak chirped an answer, and Soundwave translated. "Current disposal sites: Iacon's unrepaired sectors. Uninhabitable, suitable location."

"Sure they're uninhabitable." Light rolled behind Jazz's visor. "Where do you think those mechs recharge, anyway? In a guesthouse on Shockwave's lavish estate because he is just that generous? C'mon. Credits to cubes say those mechs will be sleeping with this junk tonight, and probably trying to build walls out of it. If Megatron and Shockwave were really interested in shoring up popularity with the masses, maybe they should have thought about using their energy to clear new living space and extend the power grid, instead of throwing a party." Jazz hopped lightly out of the path of a dirty little minibot, trying to scour the walkway clean of filth.

"Living conditions of low-functioning mecha, not your concern."

"Ah, that's right, I forgot. Megatron was the one who started this war shouting about equality, right? I was on the other side, so I must not care. Thanks for the reminder, master."

Jazz's grin was light and carefree, but Soundwave huffed just a little. "Low-functioning mecha present in Iacon before war."

"Never said there weren't. Believe me, Soundwave, I know that better than anyone."

That caught Soundwave's attention, but before he could form a probing question, Laserbeak whistled in alarm. Too late Soundwave looked up, and saw what she meant. Directly in front of them, a brand new monument now graced the spokedwheel intersection. The Constructicons must have just erected it; part of the street circling it was still torn up, forcing passerby to transform and walk past instead of driving through. Nobody could have missed Megatron's colossal statue, gleaming under the streetlights.

"Jazz -"

"Oh." He hadn't reached out in time, and Jazz froze mid-step, that breezy smile fading from his face. "Well... would you look at that: another reminder that Megatron won the war, as if we could forget. And yet another waste of time and effort that could have been spent on reconstruction. But of course, this had to go up before the mid-vorn. A true leader knows his real priorities."

He shrugged off Soundwave's hand rather than be tugged backward. "Soundwave, please. The Constructicons obviously went to a lot of work on this... stunning piece of art, it'd be rude not to look at it. I also have a feeling that Hoist and Grapple had to put it up, and I'm sure they had to look at it. So I will too. It isn't every statue in this city that Megatron concedes to share a little space with



someone else, after all.”

That 'someone' being none other than Jazz's own leader, Optimus Prime. Scrapper had really spared no effort, sculpting an elaborate image of Megatron savagely beating Optimus to the ground. The Prime, looking rather smaller than Soundwave remembered him, was shakily holding himself by one arm, trying to defend himself with the other, and Megatron held himself tall and proud, one fist raised to strike the final blow.

“Doesn't capture Megatron's best side,” Jazz mused, wandering a little closer. “Though we can hardly expect the impossible. It's very dramatic posing, with the hand-to-hand combat. Of course, those of us that were there know that that's not exactly how it happened, but we must give poetic license. And what's this? An inscription? ‘For the glory of our Lord Megatron, who saved Cybertron from certain death. The enemy would have starved us, but under the strength of Megatron he was crushed, and our home saved. ALL HAIL MEGATRON.’”

Jazz turned around and leaned casually against its base, arms crossed. “Magnificent. What do you think?”

Soundwave studied Jazz carefully. “Expected reaction: hostility.”

“Statue is just a statue, Soundwave.” Jazz shrugged. “And if Megatron wants to tell the whole world that Optimus is a weakling, that's fine by me. It just makes the world wonder why it took Megatron so damn long to bring him down.”

“Optimus, Autobots, logistically weak. Significant flaw: determination to protect others. Defensive strategy, a liability.”

“Seriously? *You're* lecturing me on the dangers of taking smaller, weaker creatures under protection?” Jazz waited only a nanoklik for the reply that Soundwave did not have. “In any case, Optimus knew the risks. We all did, and we followed him anyway. If he had asked, we would have followed him into Unicron's mouth and back. Could you say the same for you and Megatron?”

“Megatron, victorious. Saved Cybertron.”

“Megatron didn't save anything,” Jazz said sharply. “Let alone this planet. He allowed it to live so that it could serve him. I know how it feels.”

He bit his lip plating, as if he'd caught himself showing too much anger, and deliberately exhaled air from his vents.

“Suggestion, leave now.”

“Good idea. Maybe I'm not ready to appreciate fine art after all.” Still, Jazz looked up again before he was more than a step from the massive base. As if he couldn't quite help himself, a hand reached up and grazed the Prime's leg. It was only a light pat, but there was something tender, and painfully reverent, in the way Jazz touched him. If it were not beneath him, Soundwave would have been jealous of a statue.

“Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?” Jazz sang under his ventilations, soft as the caress itself. “Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you...”

Soundwave would never know what a joe-dimaggio was. His comm flipped on as Jazz was wandering away.

*"Hey boss!"* Frenzy greeted, in cheerful contrast to Jazz. *"Better cancel your exciting hax plans for*

*the evening. Guess who's back in town?"*

---

The debriefing would begin in less than two breems. Soundwave steered Jazz into his office at headquarters, where the twins were already waiting for him. Jazz had been rather on the quiet side since they left Megatron's statue, and while it pained Soundwave to see Jazz in a less-than-cheerful mood, he was hopeful that it would make things easier.

"Hey boss, 'bout time you got here! Whadja do, walk? The meeting's set to start any klik now, so why are we all in here?"

"Yes, Soundwave, why are we here?" Jazz dropped into Soundwave's chair, gaze narrowed. "Surely it's too soon for you to be lonely for this place."

Soundwave braced himself. "Jazz. Presence in officer meeting required. You... will not come."

The light in Jazz's visor flared white and in less than an astrosec he was up on his feet, every wire bristling for a fight. "You want to play this game again, master, really? I won it last time, if I recall correctly."

So much for making things easier. A small sigh escaped Soundwave's vents. "This order, not negotiable. Meeting classified. No Autobots permitted."

"Oh." The bristling faded, but an altogether too-curious gleam shone in that visor. "Classified, huh? That sounds all kinds of interesting. Now I really want to come."

"Not a possibility," Soundwave assured him. "Jazz will remain here."

"You can't leave me here alone in your office! Do you want a repeat of last time you tried that?"

"Threats unwise," Soundwave warned his slave darkly. "You will remain here. Rumble, tasked with supervision."

"What?" Now it was Rumble's turn to jump to his feet, optics blaring white with dismay. "You're making me dronesit? What'd I do?"

"Ha ha," Frenzy snickered dryly.

"Dronesit?" Jazz echoed, offended.

"Why do I have to watch the slave?"

"Because it's your turn to find out how much fun it is to keep a leash on Jazz in HQ," Frenzy put in, gloating madly away from his perch on Soundwave's console.

"Shut up. Soundwaaaave."

"Task assigned, no argument. Frenzy will attend meeting. Rumble and Jazz will remain here. Jazz will be on best behavior."

It wasn't a perfect plan, but on short notice, it was the best Soundwave could manage. Even if he'd had time to take Jazz back home, which he didn't, he didn't trust his progress on the loft's security network to keep Jazz in place. Bringing him here to headquarters was the only option, where at least he could be under supervision.

"I haven't signed on for this." Jazz fell back into his desk chair, propelling it to roll back until it bumped against his desk. "I suppose you think Rumble can just comm you the nanoklik I hack your lock and escape."

"Affirmative."

"And just what, master, will you be able to do about it? 'Excuse me, Lord Megatron, I hate to interrupt, but I have to go track down my escaping slave.' I'm sure he won't mind at all."

"Seriously, Soundwave, can we rethink this?" Rumble's emotions were tight with apprehension. "Please?"

"Understanding, Rumble and Frenzy enjoy Jazz's company."

"Well yeah, duh, but that doesn't mean I can *control* him. Only you can do that!"

How Soundwave wished that were really true. Jazz pushed at the floor with his pedes and rolled back over to Soundwave, stopping short just before he crashed into him.

"Soundwave, at least tell me we can leave the office. Please? I'll be good as gold for you and Rumble if you give me even the chance to look for my friends in the halls. You know that's all I want. Haven't I been good for you lately?"

Jazz looked up at him pleadingly, and Soundwave's resolve wavered. The chrono was ticking; he really needed to leave now. He knew it was true that Jazz really just wanted a few moments in the company of his old friends, and it was also true, according to Soundwave's growing experience, that Jazz tended to behave when given what he wanted. To do the opposite invited the worst disasters.

Just this once, then, Soundwave would compromise. It was the only solution.

"Permission to leave office, given."

"Yes!"

"You will obey all Rumble's commands. You will not address other Decepticons. If Autobots encountered -"

"I know, I know, nothing but a hold of the hand." Jazz wrapped his arms around Soundwave's waist and squeezed. "Thank you, master."

Rumble and Frenzy's interest spiked up at the sight of Jazz's unusually affectionate move, and Soundwave himself was rather caught by surprise. His temperature kicked up a notch, but never mind that just now. Gently he pried himself out of Jazz's embrace, commanded Frenzy to follow, and departed the office.

"Best behavior," he said once more, just before the door slid shut. Jazz only grinned, and waved.

---

The room, by tacit acknowledgement of everyone there, was silent. Not even Starscream opened his mouth. The handful of Decepticon officers present exchanged glances among themselves, then went back to gazing at the new arrivals. The Combaticons, all four of them, stood in the center of the room, looking miserable, exhausted, and underfueled. They were not offered seats. Megatron let the silence carry on for a vindictive 2.3 kliks before finally reclining in his chair, fingers laced.

"So," he began, and all four flinched just a little, "here you are. Returned at last, after at least twice as long as you assured me it would take. You also assured me, I recall, that this time you would succeed. Yet I see no Autobot in your custody, so unless you're allowing him to make use of his special talent, I can only assume that you failed that too. Who wants to explain?"

Blast Off opened his mouth but no sound came out, and Soundwave could hear his systems skip and tumble nervously. Brawl shifted on his feet, and Swindle made a noise that might have been clearing his vocalizer.

"I said explain!"

"My lord," Blast Off stammered. "We were so close this time. We found him hiding on this barren chunk of a planet out in X-390, we even saw him when we cornered him in a dead-end canyon run -"

"You saw him." The withering tone had Blast Off snapping his mouth shut like a sprung trap.

"You... saw him. Maybe I should have been more clear. When I dispatched your sorry team to take care of this loose end, I didn't mean for you to just get a good look at him. I know what he *looks* like. I meant for you to capture him and bring him back to Cybertron so I can put him where he belongs - in a slave collar. That was what I wanted. Tell me, was I not clear?"

Blast Off mumbled something and Megatron's fist slammed into the table. They all jumped. "*Was I not clear?*"

"No- I mean, yes." He hunched his shoulders and stared at the floor. "You were clear, Lord Megatron."

"Then why the looking and not the capturing?"

"He's fast," Vortex growled. "We had a trap all set up for him but the fragger managed to slip through it, and he's so damn good at hiding. We can't pick up nothin', no heat signature or motion or even a single sound. It's like he can turn into a ghost."

"A ghost that can outwit the four of you without much trouble, it seems."

"But we made progress, my lord." This time it was Swindle who spoke up. "We do have some good news."

"Oh, do tell."

"We trapped him on a planet this time! Even though he got away from us, we found the skiff he was piloting and destroyed it. He's a groundpounder, he's got no way to break atmo."

"That's right," Blast Off rushed to add. "Like I said, a real barren chunk of a planet. An old pre-war expedition marked it on the charts; it's called Chaar. Even if we couldn't get him, we got his transportation. He's trapped on that place now."

Megatron failed to look impressed. "Then why is he there and you here?"

"We needed fuel." This time it was Swindle that spoke up. "We hunted him all over that planet, I swear, it's why we were gone so long, and we used up almost all our rations. If we'd drunk any more, Blast Off wouldn't have had enough for the return trip. We'd have been stranded in space forever."

Megatron's expression gave no indication that this would be a tragedy. "How does the Autobot manage?"

"We think he's getting by on some mineral deposits that coat the planet's rocks. It's paltry stuff, but he's small. It'd never keep Blast Off going, let alone all of us."

"And so you turn around and walk away from your prey, leaving him free to escape the Decepticons again. Tell me, did losing your leader deprive your entire team of any kind of common sense whatsoever?" The Combaticons winced at the mention of Onslaught, then quickly tried to cover it. "Tell me why I should reward your pathetic performance with any fuel at all."

"But my lord, he's trapped -"

"Yes, yes, I've heard this before. 'This time we've got him, this time we know where he is, this time we'll catch him for sure!' And every time, you return with nothing but sad faces and pleas for more fuel."

"But this time it's true!" Brawl blurted, then hastily buttoned up when his teammates shot him dirty looks. Megatron's systems growled dangerously.

"Incompetents. I don't see why I should throw so much as a pint of energon in your direction. You're a failed, broken team that can't provide me with any useful service, and I am seriously contemplating stripping you of your Decepticon status."

All-too-obvious panic flashed across their faces. It wasn't hard to understand why. Loss of Decepticon status meant termination of fuel allotments, no more exemption from the city's laws, and any number of revoked privileges. The list of eager applicants for Decepticon induction included most of the city, so there would be no shortage of mecha willing to take the Combaticons' place. Reduced to neutral status, they'd be forced to find jobs, find their own living quarters, pay for power connections and their energon. To say nothing of the stigma they would inevitably bear the rest of their lives.

"Please, Lord Megatron," Blast Off said shakily. "Give us one more chance. We really have trapped him, we're not lying. We can finish this, if you just let us try."

Megatron studied them thoughtfully for an astrosecond. "Soundwave."

"Understood, Lord Megatron."

Respectfully Soundwave bowed his head, then turned his attention to choosing a target. All the Combaticons gulped in unison and took a reflexive step backward, as if that would somehow put them out of range. Soundwave did not hurry. He took a moment to clear his sensors of all other incoming data, switching off receptors one at a time so as to force all processor activity toward just this one task. The simplest, easiest mind would be Brawl's. He shut off his visual relay, his last contact with the physical world, and dove in.

It was widely believed by most Cybertronians that, as a telepath, Soundwave frequently spent his time rifling through the minds of everyone around him. Soundwave had never done anything to correct this misunderstanding, but it was not true. His talent, brilliant and invaluable though it was, came with its own risks. In order to explore another mech's mind it was necessary to withdraw from his own, leaving his body blind, deaf, and incapable of reacting to any threat. Telepathy was, therefore, not something Soundwave ever engaged in unless he was well-protected from any danger. Preferably, hidden away from view and with Megatron hovering over him, fusion cannon at the ready.

Warrior's minds were usually the easiest. They thought in clear, simple terms, free from the clutter that might slow down their reaction time on the battlefield. The Dinobots' minds, young as they were, had been wide and empty like the surface of Earth's moon. Starscream's was full of tricky false positives and decoy files. Soundwave had never been ordered to read Shockwave's, nor of course Megatron's, and never would attempt it unless told otherwise. His victims could feel the foreign presence in their minds and knew what was going on; inevitably they tried to struggle. Mecha would do anything to hide memory files, frantically reshuffling their archives to keep things away from his probing, usually drawing Soundwave's attention to the very thing they tried so hard to hide. Nobody won against Soundwave, not on his home battleground of the mind.

*Megatron hates us - to Megatron we are useless - Onslaught gone - gestalt broken - useless - loss of status - must please Megatron - must find Autobot - hunting always hunting Autobot - Autobot too fast - Autobot too smart - cannot lose Autobot - find Autobot catch Autobot keep Autobot.*

Soundwave found the right file with ease, and the memory archives carried on in logical sequence. *Hunting with team - must stay with team - stay on the Autobot's path - follow the Autobot - catch the Autobot - Autobot close.* It was Swindle that devised the plan to encircle and trap their prey, desperately trying to copy his former leader's tactical genius and coming up too short in the end. The Autobot managed to scramble through the rockfall and evade capture. Just as reported, Soundwave briefly glimpsed Mirage before a cascade of boulders fell between him and Brawl.

*Autobot escaped again - must follow - must catch Autobot - Megatron hates us - must return with Autobot - path lost again no way to find Autobot - what's this?*

The flow was briefly interrupted when Brawl tried to hide the next file. Resistance unwise, Soundwave stated calmly, and that small flex of energy crumpled Brawl's concentration like thin foil. Soundwave picked up where he'd left off. Brawl hadn't been so keen on letting him know it was an accident that the Combaticons managed to stumble onto Mirage's ship. It had been hidden cleverly at the base of a cliff, a minor avalanche of pebbles burying it completely. Brawl just so happened to slip and tumble down that same cliffside, landing with a painful crunch right on top of the skiff. Once they realized what they'd found, the Combaticons enthusiastically destroyed it - after, of course, siphoning out what fuel had been in the tank.

*Autobot cannot escape - Autobot here - Autobot trapped - find Autobot - catch Autobot - keep Autobot - search hunt every day - tired - so hungry - keep searching - must catch Autobot - must please Megatron - hungry hungry hungry.*

The repetitive nature of Brawl's thoughts was wearing. Soundwave gratefully withdrew when the Combaticons finally gave up their hunt and departed the Chaar planet, retreating in miserable shame to Cybertron. His own processor reactivated, switching his sensors back on at a suitably moderate pace, allowing his data input center to acclimate and not be overwhelmed with a flood of information. Visual relay was last. Megatron and the other officers were staring at him expectantly; Brawl was sagging on his struts, hands braced against knee joints, wheezing with exhaustion.

"Well?"

"Combaticons truthful. Brief visual of Autobot Mirage, confirmed. Destruction of his transportation, confirmed. Mirage, presumably trapped on surface of planet."

Megatron grunted. "A planet is still a big place to lose one fugitive. And he's obviously far more clever and fast on his feet than any of these lot. I could give them their fuel, return them to this Chaar, and still not hear from them for deca-orns while they chase him in circles."

"If Mirage is well and truly trapped," Starscream spoke up, "then why not ignore him for the moment? The Combaticons can be useful elsewhere. Earth, for example, to hunt down Sideswipe like your Stunticons have been so very unsuccessful at doing."

"Earth?" Swindle perked up hopefully. "We'll go to Earth! Just give us the mission and we'll -"

"You will go where you're ordered to go," Megatron snapped. "You can keep your mouth shut until then."

"Why entrust them to hunt down a deadly soldier when they cannot manage to catch even a small spy?" Shockwave pointed out acidly. "I agree with you, my lord, that the Combaticons have worn out their chances to prove themselves useful. They are clearly incapable of effective service without their leader, or their gestalt form. They were never properly pledged to Decepticon service anyway, following Starscream's illegitimate reactivation of their sparks. Strip them of their title, and save the empire's resources for something more useful. I have many waiting recruits who would only be too happy to prove themselves by catching these Autobots."

"Don't be a fool, Shockwave," Starscream spat. "You know nothing about the kind of military experience the Combaticons possess, both on Earth or in space, and you wouldn't have the first idea how to replace it."

Another duel was brewing between Starscream and Shockwave, and Soundwave diverted attention to his own personal notes. For the first time in some while he reviewed the list of Autobots who were unaccounted for by the end of the war - either because they'd evaded capture or their bodies had never been found. Sideswipe. Mirage. Cosmos. Seaspray. Beachcomber. Swoop. Firestar. Of these, Megatron was only really worried about the first two. All the rest were incompetent nobodies who weren't anywhere to be found in the last few years of the war, and presumed deserters. Sideswipe, anything but incompetent, had only managed to escape because his battle-maniac brother had held off the attacking Decepticons and sacrificed his own chance to get away. As for Mirage, the situation was more unclear. Espionage agents had their own agenda, and just because he'd been nowhere around the last few battles didn't mean he'd deserted. But even if he had, his talent for camouflage and infiltration made Megatron too nervous to let him alone. His continued freedom was probably the last genuine threat to the Decepticon empire.

"Enough!" Megatron snarled, and the room fell silent again. "It's true, Shockwave, no civilian in this city can offer the kind of combat experience that this pathetic lot can. Not very useful if they can't even catch up with an enemy and use it, but it is still there. I'll give them one last chance. One. Come back to me with no results, and you can just scrub off the Decepticon emblem yourselves; I won't waste another breem of my time on your failures."

"Yes, my lord." Blast Off and the others ducked and bowed. "We are grateful for your mercy."

"But which direction to send them?" Starscream asked. "Earth, or Chaar?"

"Hmm." Megatron scowled and started to raise his cube, in expectation that it would be filled.

When he remembered that there were no Autobots here to serve him, he grunted impatiently and dispersed it. "The deadly frontliner or the sneaky spy? Soundwave, you're head of intelligence. What do you think?"

A difficult question. Sideswipe's battle prowess was legendary and Soundwave would not care to be trapped alone in a room with him, and it made him uneasy to know he was roaming around Earth unchecked. But he was one soldier, versus the entire Stunticon team at the well-guarded Decepticon refining factory. Mirage might not be so violent, but Soundwave knew he was diabolically clever and depressingly good at slipping past Decepticon security. Why shouldn't he be? He was Special Ops, and Jazz's top subordinate. If Mirage had the courage and the means to return to Cybertron, would he dare infiltrate Iacon? Would he try to rescue Jazz?

"Consideration, one spy more dangerous than one soldier. Mirage's invisibility, too great a threat. Mirage a higher priority."

"I think you're right." Megatron cracked his knuckle joints, betraying his restlessness. "Your orders stand, Combaticon team. Find Mirage, bring him back, and then even a useless broken gestalt team like yourself will have earned the right to keep calling yourselves Decepticons."

"Yes, my lord." Again they bowed, resigned. Swindle looked up hopefully.

"Lord Megatron? When we capture him and come back to Iacon, you will let us keep him, right? He'll be ours... right?"

"I said so, didn't I? Now I suggest you find some bunks and get your rest. You have one cycle to recharge and resupply before leaving."

"One cycle? But we just got -"

"Are you arguing with me, Blast Off?" Megatron shot a hard glare at the obviously exhausted shuttle, and Blast Off sagged.

"No, my lord."

"Good. And remember what I said about returning empty handed. It was not an idle threat. Dismissed."

The Combaticons shuffled out of the room. Briefly Megatron shuttered his optics, a quiet growl echoing in his vocalizer. "Every time I have to look at them I want to murder Ironhide all over again, for taking Onslaught from me. I am deeply sorry I never got that chance."

"My request for a chance to do a little exploratory surgery on their neural circuits still stands," Hook reminded them all. "I've never had a chance to study the effects on a gestalt team after one of them dies. There's no risk to the existence of Bruticus anyway, so it wouldn't do, er, much harm."

"You're a sick butcher, Hook," Starscream said wryly. "The Protectobots lost their leader too. Why don't you open up your own slave's head and look inside if you're so curious?"

"Not a chance, First Aid is *useful*. How about Brawl? Nobody would miss Brawl."

"Oh, quiet, all of you," Megatron snapped at the room in general. "Nobody is going to make experiments out of my soldiers, not until I've decided they're not worthy of being my soldiers. That's up to the Combaticons now; they have their last chance."



"Maybe this time we should send some reinforcements," Starscream suggested. "Since they're so very convinced they've cornered Mirage at last. Astrotrain, at least, could -"

"I strongly protest any decision to send additional Decepticons offplanet," Shockwave rushed to interrupt, and getting a nasty glare out of Starscream for it. "The mid-vorn is fast approaching and I want the Enforcer squad under tight supervision. Astrotrain cannot be spared, nor any other mech."

"Spoken like a true desk warrior. Only you could be more concerned about crowd control than a genuine threat from the enemy."

"I don't consider a half-starved spy on some distant rock to be the enemy, I consider him a nuisance. Does he make *you* nervous, Commander Starscream?"

"You button-pushing bureaucrat, I don't -"

"Stop," Megatron ordered irritably. "I don't care about Shockwave's reasons, but I won't be sending any backup for the Combaticons. It's embarrassing enough that four veteran soldiers can't track down and capture a single Autobot spy; I'm not going to tarnish the Decepticon name by sending half the army after him. The Combaticons will either catch him on their own, or they won't at all. And if they do fail, then the whole lot of them can starve to death together on that planet and save me a lot of trouble. It's true I want that snotty little bot here in Iacon, bowing at my feet, but I can accept 'dead' too. Either option works well enough. We're done here; dismissed."

Everyone stood and bowed, and at a nod from Soundwave Frenzy switched off his recording function. Later he would catalog the minutes and upload them into Aggrenet. He was on his way to the door when Megatron fell in rather unexpectedly alongside him.

"Soundwave. Walk with me."

Surprised, but not overly bothered, Soundwave obediently followed Megatron's lead and they left the conference room together. He was not in a hurry; he'd picked up no distress from Rumble since the meeting began, and it was only reasonable to assume Jazz must be behaving himself. Wherever they were, it wasn't here. Mecha scrambled out of the way and bowed as Megatron strode through the halls.

"It was a good meeting, Soundwave, surprised though I am to admit it. Thanks to your confirmation, I'm actually inclined to believe the Combaticons when they say they can finish the job this time. I'm glad you were there."

"Assistance, happily offered."

"And if they do come home with Mirage, then perhaps I can sic them on Sideswipe and take care of him too. Then we'll have finally captured all the Autobots." He chuckled. "Well, all the ones that matter, anyway."

"Development, ideal," Soundwave agreed.

"I feel pleased, Soundwave. Things are going well for the empire, and this party business has got everyone into a good mood. I was smart to agree to Shockwave's idea after all. The planet is at peace for the first time in centuries, we have fuel flowing in from Earth, and we stand on the brink of a new golden age. Of course it's appropriate to throw a celebration. Haven't we worked hard for it? Don't we deserve it?"

"Affirmative, Lord Megatron."

"I know you agree; certainly you've worked harder than anyone else in that lot, combined. Don't think I've forgotten that. I had to return Shockwave to his former rank upon return to Cybertron, we both know that; his skills in managing the government are simply more valuable in peacetime, but you hardly deserved demotion. If you had whined, I wouldn't have tolerated it for an astrosec, but you didn't and I appreciate that."

At the time, Soundwave had had far more serious problems on his mind, but he kept silent about that. Frenzy, trotting along at his heels, was getting more and more curious about the direction of this conversation and so was he.

"This celebration is just as much for the Decepticon victory as it is for the mid-vorn. So I've decided it's more appropriate that you should follow me directly, when I go out to greet the crowds, rather than Shockwave. He's loyal and brilliant, yes, but he was never on the front lines of this war. You - and much as I hate to admit it, Starscream - deserve the glory of standing by my side."

Soundwave almost faltered in his steps when he realized what Megatron was offering. Prestige, adulation, and a taste of the popularity that surrounded Megatron everywhere he stepped: in other words, everything that Shockwave wanted when he started making these plans. He would never forgive Soundwave for usurping his place. More worryingly, he'd have his pick of targets if he decided to take revenge. If Jazz were here, he knew, he would frantically tug on his arm and insist that he refuse.

Not that refusing Megatron was exactly an option either.

"Well? What do you say?"

"Lord Megatron's offer, gratifying, accepted gratefully." To get him out, Jazz would probably make some silly joke, diverting Megatron's attention, then grab Soundwave's hand and run. Soundwave, however, had his own methods. He added, "Suspensions of protests, unlikely anyway. Investigation of iconoclasm, unnecessary. Celebration by your side, more important."

"What?"

Megatron rounded on him and they came to a stop there in the halls, the light in his optics suddenly hard. "Protests? Against me?"

"Consideration, protests during celebration possible," Soundwave elaborated, carefully not lying. "Enforcer squad, limited in resources. Extra surveillance thought necessary. Your offer, however, cannot be refused. Surveillance can be reduced -"

"Never mind that," Megatron said hastily. "This is my mid-vorn, now, I won't allow some slumdwelling ingrates to ruin it by slandering their leader. I'll be depending on you to keep an optic on things, Soundwave. Don't fail me."

Soundwave bowed. "Understood, Lord Megatron."

"Good," Megatron grunted. A curt nod signaled his dismissal and Megatron marched on, while Soundwave remained still. Frenzy squinted up at him curiously.

"We're expecting protests during the mid-vorn? Since when?"

"Not expected, only possible. Against Megatron, very unlikely. Against Shockwave, likely."

Frenzy's mouth fell open. "Did you... *lie* to Megatron?"

"Misled, more accurate."

"I'll be pitslagged." One end of Frenzy's mouth quirked up in a grin. "You know, I think Jazz is better at corrupting you than he realizes."

"Preference, you do not repeat that to him."

"Whatever. You're not really gonna make us work on the mid-vorn, are you?"

"Your behavior, a factor in that decision. Pranks, not advised."

"Heh, got it."

"Tasks here complete. Return home now." Reflexively they both turned toward the nearest stairs, following the feel of Rumble's spark. Soundwave vaguely hoped that Rumble had seized on the sensible notion of keeping Jazz upstairs, where there were bound to be fewer Decepticons at this time of the cycle, and thus less chances for Jazz to get in trouble. Instead, he found Jazz teaching Rumble how to slide down the ornate banisters while balancing on his pedes. He might have managed it if he hadn't spotted Soundwave halfway down, lost his concentration, flipped head-over-pede, and landed in a graceless heap on the stairs.

"Ouch! Uh, hey boss. Done so soon?"

Jazz, in contrast, slid cleanly to the bottom and bounced off to land just an inch away from Soundwave. "Hi honey! How was your day?" He made a show of cozying up to Soundwave's frame.

"So - wait," Frenzy said urgently. "Jazz was, like, being good for you? When he wasn't for me? That's not fair!"

"What can I say, Frenz, some cassetticons just got it and some just don't."

"Frag you."

"Jazz's behavior, acceptable?" Soundwave pried Jazz off him so he could hold his chin, examining that angelic face very closely. "At all times?"

"Well, ya know, mostly. But don't get mad at Jazz," Rumble added quickly, "it wasn't his fault. The Combaticons started it."

"Combaticons?" Soundwave repeated, alarmed. "Your instructions, not to address Decepticons."

"Oh, are we counting the Combaticons as Decepticons these days? I didn't think we were; Megatron sure doesn't. Besides, they were picking on Rumble. Not like he meant to go shooting off the rail and hit Vortex dead in the chest like that. Cranky, cranky. When was the last time that team got any sleep?"

Soundwave shot a dark look in Rumble's direction, who smiled weakly. Of all the stupid... the Combaticons had a vicious reputation for a reason. A confrontation could have had horrible results. Probably all that kept Rumble and Jazz safe was Soundwave's ownership. The Combaticons, so recently subjected to Soundwave's special method of interrogation, would have no doubt been wary of the danger and backed off. Still, it was a risk that Soundwave would have preferred not been taken.

"Jazz's behavior careless, not pleasing."

"I'm sorry, master, it was an accident." Jazz squirmed a little in his grip. "You did a nice thing for me today, letting me out of your office. I wouldn't just spit on it, you know."

"Future confrontations with Combaticons, not recommended."

"Yes sir."

So much for his behavior around Decepticons. As for Autobots... "Rumble, describe interactions between slaves."

"Huh? You mean Jazz and other bots?" Cautiously Rumble tested a knee joint, and winced. "Oh, he couldn't find any. I let him walk around the halls a little, and he looked, but no bots. That's when we came up here and he showed me how to surf the rails. He's pretty awesome at it."

Soundwave was surprised to hear that Jazz had given up so easily. Contact with his old friends was the one privilege for which Jazz unfailingly fought him. He narrowed his gaze at Jazz's easy smile.

*"Jazz, presumably frustrated," he pointed out via comm. "His good mood, illogical."*

*"Well, yeah, he saw the Combaticons minus one Mirage. Oh, he knows about that, by the way. Once he saw them, he was all cheered up."*

Interesting. At last Soundwave relinquished his grasp on Jazz's face. "Come. Return home now."

"Yes, master."

---

Soundwave kept silent until they bathed that night, his casseticons in the common room and unable to hear.

"Jazz, lied."

Jazz happened to be facing the wall while Soundwave scrubbed his back, but he turned his face a little to the side. Soundwave could see the edge of his smile.

"Oh? About what?"

"Today. Your intention, never to find other Autobots. Your intention, to find Combaticons. Stairs, fastest path to upper levels of Headquarters, empty berth chambers for Decepticons on active duty."

Jazz smothered a chuckle, arching his back struts under Soundwave's ministrations. "Don't tell Rumble. He's so proud, bragging that he can control me when Frenzy couldn't. It'd crush his spark."

"This manipulation, displeasing." Soundwave gave Jazz a little push and Jazz turned around quickly enough, backing a step or two away.

"I am sorry, Soundwave, really. But I had to know; I had to check. I wouldn't be able to recharge tonight unless I knew for sure Mirage was still free."

“Reason you know Combaticons’ mission?”

“You can blame the Seekers for that. How they love to gossip. Why do you think I like sitting on the floor so much? That’s where they made me sit, and I’m very small and easy to forget about when I’m in the corner. They forget to watch what they say... so careless.”

“Mirage, likely to be caught soon.”

“No he's not,” Jazz said simply, without a trace of fear or defiance. "Now then, it’s been a while since we adjusted that scoreboard. Whose point should it be? Mine, for getting away with my evil scheme, or yours for catching on at least eventually?”

Soundwave slapped a hand against the tiles by Jazz’s head and Jazz did not so much as twitch.

“Jazz, too arrogant.”

“It’s not arrogance when you’re *really good*.”

“Jazz, not that good. Your motive discovered. Point, mine.”

“Touché. We are tied once more. And I won’t ever get caught again.”

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on the roof

"Happy mid-vorn, Soundwave."

Soundwave looked up from the hax set, which he had only just begun to study, at Jazz lounging in the chair opposite. He grinned lazily. "Well? It's customary to say somethin' back."

"Happy mid-vorn," Soundwave echoed. "Jazz."

"Thaaat's more like it. You may be you, after all, but even you can't be deaf to what's goin' on out there."

He was right about that. Soundwave had been conscious of a raised noise level outside since they woke up, but then he spent most of the morning in his soundproof office, analyzing surveillance data recorded by his younger twins. By the time he'd left it, the decibel level had gone up considerably. More mecha would have left their jobs by now, attracted to the swelling crowds out in the streets. From up here it all sounded like a muffled roar, but the loft itself was still peaceful. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw were recharging in his chest, and Ravage was sprawled across the back of the couch, napping.

Jazz picked up a hax piece, idly toying with it. "This is our first mid-vorn in centuries, isn't it? For all of us that were in stasis on Earth. Crazy. If someone at the last party told me how I'd be spending the next one, I'd have never believed it. Actually, if someone at the last new-vorn told me where I'd be halfway through it, I'd have never believed that either. You think we'll both still be sitting here at the end of the vorn, locked in a deadly battle over this hax game?"

"Unlikely. Current prediction, this game concluded before then. Defeat yours, victory mine."

Jazz laughed. "Not a chance, Decepticon, I am just now hitting my stride. There is so much more game to be played. Admit it; you've never met an opponent that could make it last this long."

"Jazz's strategy, unusual," Soundwave acknowledged, which was a roundabout way of admitting it was true. "Difficult to predict."

"As my last hax partner well knew, much to his chagrin. Playing hard to predict is half of how I win." He plonked his piece down in a new square with a dramatic flourish, then settled back in his chair for Soundwave's turn.

Last hax partner... Soundwave supposed that must be the Autobot's second-in-command, Prowl. The mech was a brilliant strategist, and Soundwave had often admired his sharp tactical plans on the battlefield. Out of all the rowdy Autobot crew, he seemed most likely to indulge in a hobby like hax. Spy footage from his own symbiotes, also, indicated that the Prime's top two officers spent much of their off-duty time together, and shared a strong friendship. It was a friendship that Soundwave, given his own standing with Starscream and Shockwave, had often envied throughout the war.

It was a friendship, come to think of it, that made very little sense.

"Jazz, spent much time with Prowl."

Now it was Jazz's turn to look up, surprised. "Sure. He was my best friend for a long time."

"Statement illogical. Initial introduction to Prowl, antagonistic. Jazz under investigation for criminal activity; Prowl, arresting officer."

A wicked smile spread across Jazz's face, and he propped his chin on laced fingers. "You nosy sneak. You've been reading my history, haven't you? You really shouldn't have bothered. It's such a boring story."

Soundwave's vents opened a little wider, expelling the small heat of embarrassment. "History, not understood. Prowl, high ranking Enforcer; Jazz, suspected criminal. Friendship unlikely."

Jazz laughed again. "Too true. Ah, I'll never forget the look on his face when we met in Prime's office that first time. He glitched so hard it took Ratchet most of an orn to get him back online again. For vorns, he wouldn't take his optics off me, and argued against sending me on solo missions. Once a cop, always a cop. Didn't think I'd ever get him to trust me."

"Reason for change?"

"War. Saved his life a few times, and he saved mine." Jazz twirled a finger. "I unwound that enforcer bit by bit, and next thing he knew we were playing hax at nights. Charm, you see, has always been my greatest weapon."

Soundwave frowned a little, behind his mask. "Relationship, intimate?"

"Jealousy, thy name is Soundwave."

"Answer question."

Jazz's smile faded a little. "Every now and then. I just wanted to help him relax, he needed it so bad. Didn't work." He propped his chin on his hands again. "Aren't you going to ask if I did it?"

"Did what?"

"That criminal activity he arrested me for. 'Trading in illegal goods and services', I believe, was the exact charge. Three times, bless his spark. He never could find the evidence."

"Irrelevant," Soundwave said dismissively, then thought it over. "Consideration, Jazz's guilt very likely."

"Guess no one will ever know now." A razor-sharp smile flitted across Jazz's expression, sinister as any Decepticon's. If Jazz really was a part of Cybertron's criminal underworld, Soundwave wondered why he'd chosen the Autobot side. Most of them had gone the other way, if they'd picked any side at all. If Jazz had joined the Decepticons, Soundwave couldn't help but think, the war would have probably ended a lot sooner.

"Reason, Jazz chose Autobots?"

"The shell that splintered my nightclub had a Con emblem on it," Jazz answered matter-of-factly. "Can't say you boys gave me a whole lot of choice."

Soundwave supposed there wasn't anything he could say to that, so he didn't. "Your history, incomplete. Origins unknown; frame designers unlisted, no sparking date."

Something flickered behind Jazz's visor, too fast for Soundwave to identify. "Some other time, Soundwave. Better just concentrate on your turn."

Soundwave would not get that chance. The peace of the loft was shattered when Rumble and Frenzy burst through the door, like a shot fired out of the celebrations and straight into his home.

"You're all still here! *What* are you all still doing up here?"

"Don't you know there's a party going on outside?"

"Parties? As in, all over the city?"

"And you're missing all of it! Quick, c'mon!"

Ravage unshuttered his optics and glared, a growl reverberating in his chest, but the twins paid him no mind and instead launched themselves at Jazz and Soundwave.

"Get up, now! You two can play hax anytime!"

"And *do*."

"So you're not going to sit there and stare at a stupid set while Iacon rolls in the party of the century."

"Well, half-century."

"Whatever. C'mon, Jazz, it's going to be so awesome." Eagerly Frenzy hooked his fingers into Jazz's armor and tugged. "Shockwave's rich jerkface friends are hosting parties all over the place, and the free high-grade is flowing."

"And there's vendors selling all the best treats," Rumble added, perched on Soundwave's lap. "Oil rolls and candied minerals and those fizzy things that go pop-pop in your mouth. And the jets are doing all these cool stunts in the sky!"

"And artists painting designs on your armor!"

"Yeah, and any breem now they're gonna start the laser lights show! C'mon, c'mon, *c'mon*."

"Ah, sorry boys." Jazz's smile was full of regret as he picked up Frenzy and put him back down on the floor. "But I can't say I'm much in the mood to join you. A city-wide party thrown to congratulate Megatron on his victory is just a little more than my fuel tank can handle."

"What?" Both twins looked dismayed. "You won't come with us? You can't do that! Soundwave, he has to come, right?"

Everyone looked at him: the twins, anxious and determined, Jazz biting his lip plating in an uncharacteristic display of nervous dread.

Soundwave shook his head. "Negative. Cassetticons will attend mid-vorn without us."

"You're not coming?" they wailed in unison.

"Soundwa~ave!"

"It's the mid-vorn!"

"And you're one of the highest-ranked mecha on the planet! Starscream and Shockwave are out there gettin' gushed over by the crowds, and you won't even come out for just a little? It's not like they did more than you!"

"Praise, unnecessary for effective performance of duty."

"But boss -"



"Participation not desired. Discussion concluded." He sent just one pulse of warning across the link, and the twins subsided. Crestfallen, their shoulders slumped.

"Yes, boss."

"Cheer up, boys," Jazz consoled. "You know Soundwave is allergic to fun. He would only hold you back. Go wreak your mischief, and bring me back something tasty. Who knows, maybe he'll even let me eat it by myself."

Soundwave shot Jazz a dry look, but the twins' mood did lift a little and they smiled again. Their excitement had wormed its way through the link, and he could feel two more minds stirring awake within him. He ejected Laserbeak and Buzzsaw so they could join their big brothers.

"All casseticons, excused from regular patrols for duration of festivities. Only stipulation, record any unusual or suspicious activity."

"Yeah, yeah. Oh, and can we have some extra creds? Special occasion and all?"

Four hopeful gazes fixed on him, and Soundwave relented. Centuries of warfare had done such damage to the planet's economy that street purchases actually required physical currency, and Soundwave had developed the habit of carrying it since he and Jazz began their daily walks. He accessed his subspace for some credit chips.

"Spend carefully. Dismissed."

"Yes, boss!"

"Have fun tonight - not!"

The aerials chirped their own farewells, and all four stampeded out the door. Soundwave summoned Ravage, the only symbiote he could count on to actually concentrate on something other than fun, and gave him his own orders. He was curious to know if there was any negative reaction to Shockwave or his plans after all. If there were mutterings in the crowd, Ravage would hear them. His oldest cassette considered the directions, mildly surprised but also interested, and bowed his head. Then he turned and slunk out the door, as silent as the others had been noisy, and disappeared from sight.

"You know," Jazz drawled, "your brats weren't exactly wrong. Nobody can say you didn't do your part in that war. You sure you're okay sitting this out?"

"Praise, unnecessary -"

"It's not about 'necessary', Soundwave, it's a party. It's just about enjoying yourself. You can bet that if the war went the other way, and it was Autobots out there wavin' to the crowds, I would be in on that. I'd be throwin' the swinginest party this city ever did see."

"No doubt."

"If you wanted to go, I'd give you my word to stay put here. I'd even mean it."

"Offer appreciated," Soundwave said wryly. "But unnecessary. Two hundred cameras currently recording in Iacon. Surveillance analysis tomorrow will allow thorough viewing of celebration."

"Party of the half-century and you're okay with watching it on tape. You really did get the wrong bot, Soundwave. You and Prowl would have got along just fine. You could sit here over a hax

table and be stoic and logical at one another until the universe imploded, happy as clams. Course, I'd never wish such a miserable fate on your little ones." Jazz had slumped back in chair, staring at the ceiling, but now he lifted his head to look at Soundwave again. "Wait. Does that mean you do at least want to see the party?"

Soundwave had to backtrack a little to follow Jazz's line of thought. "Surveillance, my task. Watching such events, always necessary and expected."

"I think that's a yes." Jazz was giving him that thoughtful look again, and half his mouth quirked up in a grin. "Well. Let it never be said that Jazz misses a good time. I have a reputation to uphold, and you have a party to watch." His visor flashed briefly with the onset of a new idea. "Gotta roof?"

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He did, not that he'd ever spared a thought for it. It had no holes in it and kept the rain out, which was all Soundwave ever expected from a rooftop, and that was the end of the matter. Jazz had different ideas. In less time than it took for Soundwave's thrusters to kick on, he'd slithered out a window and flipped himself up over the edge in some strange repudiation of the laws of gravity. Like every roof on Cybertron, this one had a gentle slope on each side to prevent acid rain from pooling, but it wasn't so steep as to prevent Jazz from settling himself comfortably near the apex. After a moment's hesitation, Soundwave touched down beside him.

"This effort, unnecessary."

"Enough about the 'unnecessary', Soundwave, parties are not about necessary. In fact, they're kinda the opposite. Sit back, relax, enjoy the view. Iacon hasn't seen something like this in hundreds of vorns."

Everywhere around them, the streets were packed with jubilant mecha, pushing, shouting, and jumping to the beat of whatever music streamed from open nightclubs. Overhead, Starscream was leading his Seekers in complicated aerial stunts, his loops and spins drawing cheers from the crowd.

"Seems to be enjoying himself," Jazz observed, amused. "Guess he figures that as long as Megatron insists on this shindig, he might as well soak up the spotlight. Starscream is such a show-off."

"Jazz, not one to judge."

"You're so mean." Jazz grinned at him, then leaned back against his braced hands to watch. As unpleasant as it might be to acknowledge, Soundwave had to admit that Starscream's flying was a thing of beauty, something every Decepticon - most especially Starscream himself - knew. In battle, he and his troops were deadly accurate weapons in the air. Now, in peacetime, they could afford to indulge in their fanciest tricks, wheeling about in the sky like Earth's colorful tropical birds. After a while, they dipped their wings in salute and descended below the skyline, ready to join the parties on the ground.

"Lovely performance," Jazz declared. "I find the Seekers so much more attractive when there's an entire city between me and them. And now that Starscream's done struttin' his stuff, now Shockwave should- ah, there we go."

Barely had the Seekers vacated the sky when multiple lasers lit up all over the city, shooting precise and brilliantly colored beams up into the night. The first ones were all, of course, violet, and drew the Decepticon emblem in huge scale across the sky. After the expected cheer from the crowds, though, that image disappeared and the lasers all flipped over into multiple colors. The technicians wielding them moved on to popular, traditional laser displays, drawing dazzling patterns and swirls against the black.

"I don't think I said thank you," Jazz murmured, after a few breems of silent watching.

"For?"

"Not making me be out there, much as the twins had their sparks set on it. It would have been... hard. Even for me."

"Gratitude unnecessary. Autobot presence at Decepticon celebration inappropriate."

"I really hope," Jazz sighed, "that the other Decepticons agree with you."

Soundwave thought it unlikely that Starscream or another Decepticon would suffer to be held back by a manacled slave while showing off to the crowds, but it was also quite likely they would bring their slaves to wait upon them in the private parties. He kept these thoughts to himself. Jazz had absorbed himself in the displays again, mesmerized by the dancing colors.

"Your turn."

"Turn?"

"We were having a conversation, before Torpedoes Red and Blue interrupted. You know about what I did before the war. Fair's fair; it's your turn to fess up. What were you up to before that whole struggle-to-rule-the-world thing came along?"

This was an unexpected query. Soundwave automatically ran a scan on his deep archives, briefly amazed at the ancient timestamps. So much of them had been cleaned out, leaving only basic information and images. The few names that had been relevant at the time had been disposed of entirely, emptied from the permanent memory cache forever.

"Function: intelligence gathering and investigation. Services offered, best on Cybertron, most expensive. Clients: politicians, industry leaders, scientists." They had all come to him, he remembered, even if the names themselves were lost. Only the richest mecha could afford his services but his talents were worth it; there was no network he could not hack, no secret he could not uncover. He had destroyed whole businesses and lifted others to the top, to say nothing of lives.

"Initially, alone. Later, with Ravage. His infiltration skills, considerable."

Jazz snorted softly. "Don't I know it."

"Wealthy new client in Kaon made contact, needed certain tasks performed. Designation: Shockwave. Financial backer of early Decepticon movement. His superior pleased with results. Megatron made contact, arranged more longstanding employment."

Soundwave had never planned on such a thing, preferring to stay independent and choose his clients as he wished, but the course of Cybertron's events made that decision for him. Their planet's sophisticated infrastructure was starting to crumble under the revolution, and the mechs who'd once used Soundwave to find their fortune and glory were no longer wealthy enough to hire him. Or even, for that matter, alive. With a new pair of symbiotes to shelter and feed, there was no other

option worth considering. When Megatron made his offer, Soundwave accepted it promptly.

“And so it began,” Jazz breathed, “a thousand nights of war. Did you ever miss your civilian life? Get a little homesick for the creature comforts of peace?”

“Negative. Seeking something nonexistent, useless waste of time and resources. All energy focused on assisting Megatron and Decepticon forces.”

“Well I did. Don’t see how anyone couldn’t. Always it was goin’ back and forth, the shells, the missiles, the soldiers, the hate. It was like Death somehow got stuck between us, the Autobots and Decepticons, and all we could do was push it from one side of the planet to the other. Sometimes I wanted to scream at Megatron to just take Kaon already, do whatever he wanted to it. Take half of Cybertron, for all I care. Course he’d have never been satisfied with just half. Optimus said so in the very beginning, and he was right.”

More and more colors were crowding into the sky, scribbling frantically against the black. The light was so intense that lines of afterglow remained even when the lasers had moved on, leaving a swirl of vivid colors.

“I always kinda took on the job of keepin’ up morale, giving the guys a reason to smile now and then. Primus knows we needed it. But after so long, it was gettin’ just a mite hard to do. So many of our race had died, hell, even the planet itself was about to die. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold on. Didn’t know if I could raise my own spirit anymore, let alone anyone else’s. But then the *Ark* crashed, and we woke up on Earth, and that’s when everything changed. That’s when I fell in love.”

A new red one splashed onto the scene, momentarily overwhelming the other colors, and Soundwave's spark chamber constricted in a spasm of pain. He was at once envious, furious, and sparkbroken. He forced a full ventilation cycle before speaking.

“Designation?”

Jazz laughed like he’d said something funny. “Not with a mech. With *music*. Earth’s music. It was like nothin’ I’d heard before, but when I did – that first time – part of me felt like I’d been waitin’ to hear it all my life. Suddenly I wasn’t so tired. Suddenly, I was on a planet that had been creating beautiful sounds instead of ripping itself apart with war for the past hundred vorns. And they had so many different kinds. Just like their languages – how come we only have one language? It’s so boring. I couldn’t believe my audios when I heard all the sounds those little humans were speakin’ to each other with.”

A thousand gold pinpricks sparkled across the sky. Jazz's voice was warm in a way Soundwave had never heard before, his visor glowing softly as he gazed up into the night.

“I had a devil of a time when I realized there was no Earth word for my name, ‘style of music’. Humans didn’t even know there could be such a thing as having only one. They had words for every kind – rock, classical, reggae, hip-hop, blues... I didn’t think I could ever choose. But then I heard *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, Fats Waller. And Louis Armstrong. And Billie Holliday. Everybody did that song. It was just that golden, and just that perfect for me. That’s when I knew I had to be *Jazz*.” He pronounced his English name with special relish. “Any music that could spin a tune like that had to be the goods. It’s still my favorite.”

He paused, head tilting slightly toward Soundwave in silent expectation. Feeling somewhat predictable, Soundwave obliged.

“This song, not known.”

“Course not. Oh Soundwave, what am I gonna do with you?” Idly he propped one leg on his bent knee. “Fine, I’ll let you have a listen. If only because I am determined to teach you the joy of music, or die trying. And I know my sound system isn’t what it used to be, so hold your comments.”

Soundwave had barely processed the significance of what Jazz was saying before, for the first time since coming here, Jazz’s speakers buzzed to life. True, the sound was a little scratchy and not all that loud, but it was *there*. Jazz, who swore he never played his files anymore, was doing exactly that.

Visor dialed down to its dimmest glow, Jazz crooned along to the words, while laser lights played across the sky like an electronic rainbow. They flickered against the sheen of his white armor, turning Jazz blue then green then purple. The music meant nothing to Soundwave, but he thought Jazz looked extraordinarily beautiful while enjoying it.

“Gorgeous, ain’t it?” Jazz murmured, as the human-made instrument dwindled to its last few notes. Soundwave couldn’t agree or disagree with that, so he fell back on his usual practice of saying nothing at all. Instead, he stroked the back of his hand lightly against Jazz’s cheek plating.

He thought he heard a hiccup in Jazz’s ventilations, but he did not flinch or grimace. With a small sigh, he leaned into the touch, allowing Soundwave to leisurely stroke the smooth dermal metal.

Soundwave rubbed his thumb against it for a little while, then let his hand glide down over Jazz’s neck. Still no negative reaction. He delicately ran his fingertips along a fluid line without response, then found a sensor wire. He fondled it, and Jazz’s engine let out an unmistakable rev.

Possibly no one was more surprised by this than Jazz, who stifled a tiny gasp and curled his fingers against the roof. But he didn’t try to push himself away and he wasn’t kicking at Soundwave’s shins, and Soundwave would take that to be his invitation. He rolled over, against Jazz’s side, and brought his other hand to Jazz’s chest. For the briefest of moments Jazz froze underneath it, and his hand moved to cover Soundwave’s like he would push it away. Once it was there, though, he hesitated.

Their gazes met, Jazz’s a complete mystery behind the reflections of colored lasers playing across his visor. Then he looked at their hands. Slowly he put pressure against Soundwave’s, not to shove it off him, but to guide it lower. He moved Soundwave’s hand under the edge of the bumper, running it along underneath. Now Soundwave could feel that engine rumbling eagerly within, and he could hear the heavy airflow rushing through Jazz’s vents. His own vents were none too quiet either.

When he circled the sensitive seam around Jazz’s headlight, Jazz rolled a low moan around in his vocalizer and pressed up into the touch.

Soundwave was on top of Jazz before he realized he’d moved. Hands coasted back and forth across his armor before slipping in between the loosened armor plates, and Jazz didn’t fight him at all. He arched his back and moaned again, electricity surging from his vulnerable hidden wiring and onto Soundwave’s fingertips. Energy raced up Soundwave’s circuits. His spark was already whirling with excitement before he realized Jazz’s hands were gliding up his own armor, past his waist, and to the bottom edge of his chest glass. Fingertips found the thin seam and traced it lightly, triggering another surge of heat within Soundwave. Again he plunged his hands underneath Jazz’s armor, reveling in the crackles of electricity and how Jazz bucked with every fresh onslaught. And Jazz’s hands kept creeping into new and wonderful places on Soundwave’s own body, giving as good as he got.

Soundwave lowered himself completely over Jazz, mask retracted, and traced his glossa over the sensor wire in Jazz’s neck. Jazz’s engine roared with pleasure and he tipped his chin up, inviting Soundwave to more. The rush of vindication was almost as sweet as the actual pleasure. How many

orns, had he patiently held back? Trained Jazz with his handfeeding? Done everything he could to encourage his fearful slave to trust and not fear his touch? Now this small Autobot was writhing underneath him, willingly exposing his neck to what was once his enemy, now his master. It was the ultimate display of trust, and Soundwave exploited it completely. He bit and nibbled at wires at leisure. He tasted as much as he liked. And while he did so, he moved one of his hands back down Jazz's body, sliding between Jazz's legs. Jazz stiffened then, just a little, but only for a sparkbeat. Again he covered Soundwave's hand with his own, and spread his legs in accommodation. He was the one that moved Soundwave's fingers to the gap between hip and leg armor.

Inside, Soundwave lightly rubbed a sensor wire, and Jazz let out a particularly enticing moan. His visor had shuttered by now, but he was still pushing himself up into Soundwave's touch, panting through his mouth like he always did when his vents couldn't keep up with the heat. Soundwave still kept half his attention on his ministrations below, but he was becoming increasingly attracted to that mouth. It was so perfect and inviting, when open like that, and he wanted to explore it like he had the rest of Jazz's body. He shifted his position just enough to put himself within reach, weaving a trail of kisses up Jazz's neck and over the edge of his chin.

Jazz tipped his head back before he could quite reach. Disappointed, Soundwave inched up and tried again, and this time Jazz turned his head to the side, leaving Soundwave to kiss his cheek. No matter how hard Soundwave tried, Jazz managed to evade him on every attempt.

"No," he wheezed, when Soundwave kept trying. "No... no, no, no no nonono!"

Jazz's voice became increasingly urgent, the roar of his engine dying away. It took several astrosecs for Soundwave to perceive that Jazz wasn't just moving underneath him anymore, he was *sliding*.

By the time he did, it was too late. All of their enthusiastic activity had shifted them into a careless position on the sloped rooftop, and they'd lost control of their balance. Frantically Jazz grabbed at Soundwave's arm but didn't have near the traction to hold back someone of Soundwave's weight, and they both went half-tumbling, half-sliding down the roof and shot straight over the edge.

Luckily their respective reflexes kicked in. Soundwave's thrusters flared to life before they'd even begun to drop, and though they weren't meant to be activated mid-air, he spread his pedes and kept from flailing about in a panic that could shoot him into the side of a building. For his part, Jazz clung hard to Soundwave's chest and didn't move, acting as ballast instead of an extra weight that could topple him over.

It all happened so fast that neither of them quite seemed to know how to react, beyond what their self-preserving instincts had already done. In mid-air they floated, recovering a steady sparkbeat, and distantly Soundwave could still hear the crowd's joyful roar. Nobody else knew what had nearly happened to them. They could have crashed to the ground and knocked themselves both into stasis, and nobody would have even cared. Jazz started to shake, the vibrations easily carrying through to Soundwave's frame, and at first Soundwave assumed it was out of fear.

Then some muffled squeaks slipped out of his vocalizer, increasing in volume, until Jazz burst into laughter. Not in the least bothered by Soundwave's silence, he kept on laughing for most of the breem, taxing his already spent ventilation systems to their failing point. At total ease even up here, he linked his hands behind Soundwave's neck and wrapped his legs around Soundwave's waist, settling himself quite comfortably.

"Ah, what a terrible way to go that would have been. Imagine, dying in the arms of a Decepticon just because he doesn't know how to keep his balance on a simple rooftop."

"Fault, not mine."

"Says you. I know *I* never have trouble staying on top of a building when that's where I want to be." Jazz leaned back, smiling, but the look behind his visor was unreadable. "Maybe... this was a sign from the universe. I think I probably overstepped the limits tonight. We shouldn't have done what we did."

"Your statement, subjective, not agreed with."

"Well you wouldn't, would you?" Jazz sighed. "I'm tired; let's go in. Unless you'd rather just hover out here like a rotating display for the mid-vorn all night."

Soundwave wanted to argue the point, but he recognized that trying to do so right now was pointless. The mood had effectively been ruined; even his own battle mask had already snapped back into place, a reflexive response to any physical threat against his safety. Forcing anything more would be counterproductive.

So he acquiesced. Carefully Soundwave floated back to his balcony and touched down, allowing Jazz to disembark at his own pace. Without saying a word, Jazz pushed him toward the couch, popped in one of the twins' million-title collection of human movies, and settled by his side to watch. After a breem, he was resting against Soundwave's shoulder. And that was how they spent the remainder of Cybertron's first mid-vorn celebration in centuries.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on hangovers

### Chapter Notes

I've just posted a new story to my profile here at AO3 in celebration of the holidays - see how Rumble and Frenzy interpret the idea of Christmas by checking out TGWP: Secret Santa. In their defense, it was only a little mayhem.

"Don't walk so loud," begged Rumble, and then whimpered from the effort that it took to speak.

"But hurry," Frenzy mumbled. "My systems are so fried. I feel like one giant crispy wire."

"Patience advised. Your current condition, result of your own decisions." Soundwave stopped at the side of his berth, where three of his cassettes were laid out like invalids, moaning and whining as if at death's door. Heavy overindulgence in highly refined energon had shorted out some systems and depleted their coolant tanks, resulting in overheating. Soundwave was annoyed, but not at all surprised. Tenderly he arranged a cloth soaked in cold water over each of their bodies, to help bring down their temperature.

Sitting on the other edge of the berth, Jazz leaned over Rumble with a dropperful of coolant.

"C'mon, Rumble, open up."

"Go 'way. You make my head hurt."

"No can do, Little Boy Blue. Your coolant tank is scorched dry and you are in serious need of hydration. I know your tank feels awful right now, but you need this." Gently Jazz pried open Rumble's mouth, and managed to get a few droplets of moisture inside. Rumble's fuel intakes convulsed and he made a wretched-looking face.

"Blech. So what are you, a medic?"

"No, just very very experienced in these matters. Basic rule of the universe: no matter how good the party, the hangover's always better." Jazz looked amused at the twins' pain, so it was just as well that neither of them were engaging their optics. Soundwave watched him refill the dropper and repeat his ministrations on Frenzy. "Haven't you two ever been drunk before?"

"We've had high-grade before."

"Maybe not this much."

"Maybe not that pure."

"Those rich parties were serving up the really refined stuff. Wow. It was like..."



"Sunshine," Frenzy murmured dreamily. "Sunshine on your glossa."

"Yeah. That."

"You really missed out, Jazz."

"Yeah, your loss."

"I'll cope somehow," Jazz assured them. "And what about you, LB? Were you drinking the same stuff?"

Laserbeak's optics flushed redder in her embarrassment, and she chirped a tiny affirmative.

Soundwave knew, just from exploring her end of the link, that she was not nearly as bad off as her older brothers, but she did tend to get overexcited at parties and forget her limit. Buzzsaw had to bring her home, carrying her while in cassette mode in his claws. Now he was perched at the head of the berth, radiating waves of smug *I told you so* in every direction.

"Then I'm guessin' you could use some hydration too. C'mere, darlin'." Jazz was being as careful as he could, when he scooped up Laserbeak to settle her into his lap, but even so, the slight jostling had its effect. Soundwave sensed her unease develop into sudden and total panic.

"Jazz, caution advised. Laserbeak -"

Too late. She lost the fight against her fuel tank and emptied most of it, in a spectacular multicolored splash, all over Jazz's chest.

"Oh, not again!" Jazz rolled a disgusted noise down his throat. "What is it with this household and dumping slag all over me?"

Soundwave vented a sigh, and Buzzsaw snickered. It said a lot for the twins' current misery that they couldn't even be bothered to point and laugh; the best they could manage was a bleary glimpse and a vague grunt. Laserbeak shrunk into herself, humiliated and clucking miserably.

"Laserbeak, apologetic."

"Aw, I know it, sweetspark." Jazz's grimace softened, and he rubbed her lightly on the head. "I know you didn't mean it. Let's go rinse off in the racks, and then you'll feel better. Guess I should be grateful you didn't regurgitate any dead glitchmice on me."

He shot Soundwave a wry grin and departed, cradling the woebegone aerial in his arms.

Soundwave collected the coolant decanter and dropper, and continued Jazz's task of forced hydration on the twins.

"So?" Frenzy mumbled, after choking more of it down. "When are you gonna tell us?"

"About what happened last night?"

"Tell?" Soundwave echoed, his tone neutral.

"Don't play dumb, boss."

"Yeah. A, you're not capable of it and B, we all felt it."

"One sizzling-hot spike of pleasure and then you slammed the link shut before we could even get to the good stuff. You're so selfish, Soundwave."

"Whydja leave us out, huh?"

"We wanted some of that too, ya know."

"So spill the details already."

"Was he good? Did he smoke your circuits?"

"How many times did you overload?"

"None."

"What?" they both cried, then promptly cringed and groaned in agony.

"We came home and found both of you recharging on the couch."

"With Jazz's head in your *lap*."

"And you expect us to just believe that you didn't get any?"

"Negative. Expectation, you will pester for details repeatedly. Second expectation, no answers will be given. Details not forthcoming."

"So you did manage to do *some* things."

"Don't know why you wouldn't let us in on it. We're part of this team, too, aren't we?"

"And you've been keeping him all for yourself all this time."

Soundwave continued his task of supplying the pair with coolant, switching back and forth between the two without break in his stride. "Reminder, casseticons wanted nothing of Jazz in the beginning."

"Yeah well, it's different now," Rumble muttered petulantly. "We like him."

"Laserbeak's in love with him," Frenzy added. "You know that."

"Your feelings, all known," Soundwave assured his symbiotes. "Not forgotten. But for now, Jazz mine. Progress in taming him, uncertain." He thought of Jazz, moaning with delight on the roof.

Then later, a mystery behind his visor, regretting what he'd done. Which one was right? Did even Jazz know?

"Rushing, at this point, suspected dangerous. Patience necessary."

The twins made grumbling noises of acceptance and wrapped themselves back up in their own misery, lacking in the energy to argue anymore. Soundwave was relieved. Prying questions from his symbiotes were nothing he could not handle, but it was not knowing the answers himself that irritated him. Soundwave was not accustomed to not knowing answers.

The more alert Buzzsaw felt his frustration, and chirped inquiringly.

"*Concern, unnecessary,*" Soundwave assured him. "*Success will come eventually.*"

"*Not my concern,*" Buzzsaw replied flippantly. "*My concern: how often Master will be hurt in meantime.*"

He folded his wings over his head and shuttered his optics for a nap, and said nothing more.

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Soundwave wasn't sure whether he was disappointed or relieved at Ravage's report, that evening.

While most of his team was still groaning and whimpering in the next room, Soundwave downloaded Ravage's surveillance into his console, running several filters for sedition. Whether Shockwave-related or not, there were no results. Free high-grade seemed to be all that was on the minds of anyone in the streets last night.

Back in his root mode, Ravage sensed his distress and formed a general inquiry. His natural assumption was that Soundwave would be very pleased.

"Results, not displeasing," Soundwave corrected, or tried to. Datapad in hand, he sat down on the couch to scroll through the many recorded conversations. All of it was simple low-intel conversations, punctuated with occasional cheers for Megatron. "My expectations, unclear. Some negative reactions against Shockwave, thought possible."

Ravage hopped onto the couch and curled up beside him, resting his head on Soundwave's leg.

Wisely, he pointed out that overhearing backlash against Shockwave would have come with its own problems, and Soundwave conceded that this was true. He still felt strangely let down, which he could only attribute to Jazz's growing influence on him. Ravage snorted at that, and nudged his head against Soundwave in a way that demanded a little physical attention. Happy to oblige, Soundwave began scratching him behind the audios.

Ravage had always been very selective about petting and touching; he had a distinctly un-cassettelike preference for personal space. Ravage had lived independently much longer than any of his siblings before attaching himself to a master, and it showed. He kept to his own schedule, ranged much farther and for longer periods of time than any of the others, and when he was home, did not insist on Soundwave's affections. He was usually content to curl up in the corner and admire his master from afar. When he did decide he wanted a petting, though, his siblings knew to steer clear and let him have his alone time with Soundwave. It was just the way it had always been.

The casseticons knew; Jazz did not. Jazz who picked that moment to enter the room and saunter up to the couch. "It's like a medbay in there, I can't take any more of the groaning. I need a break. Whatcha readin'?"

Heedless of the danger, he hopped over the back of the couch, almost right into Soundwave's lap.

Soundwave didn't have a chance to speak a word of warning before Ravage lashed out and got Jazz on the forearm.

"OUCH!" Jazz threw himself against the far end of the couch, holding his arm against his chest, clearly shocked. Soundwave snapped a rapid burst of anger at Ravage, who laid his audios back and growled unrepentantly.

*Interrupted*, he snarled.

"Unacceptable," Soundwave replied sharply. "*Jazz did not know. Attack, unprovoked.*" He was especially annoyed because it had seemed like Jazz might be in the mood to be affectionate. If he had been then he wasn't anymore, huddled defensively against the couch's end and watching

Ravage's every move like his life depended on it. How exasperating; Jazz should not have to be afraid at this point in his training.

"Ravage, apologize now."

"Ah, that won't be necessary, Soundwave," Jazz said, at about the same time as Ravage made his own refusal clear with a single, sharp image. "I get it; I got too close. Seems Ravage is the kind who doesn't like to share his *things*."

Ravage bared his fangs and hissed at Jazz. Jazz bared his own fangs and hissed right back, in surprisingly good imitation.

"Stop," Soundwave ordered. "*Both*, stop. Antagonism, unnecessary and displeasing. Ravage, apologize."

Ravage turned his nose up disdainfully, and hopped clear of the couch. "I wouldn't accept it anyway," Jazz shouted at his tail, right before Ravage retreated into the office and the door slammed shut behind him. Then he shot a glare at Soundwave.

"Maybe it's time you choose, lover. This place isn't big enough for the both of us. It's me, or the cat!"

Soundwave cycled air out of his vents. "Jazz, speaking nonsense. Show injury."

"It's fine." Jazz hugged his arm a little closer to his body. "I didn't mean to yell like that, I was just surprised. It's... been a long time since I had to worry about getting hurt so suddenly."

Soundwave moved closer to Jazz, and without wasting more time on words placed a gentle hand aside Jazz's face. A light rubbing there, a little tickling in Jazz's shoulder joint, and before long Soundwave had coaxed Jazz into releasing his arm for inspection. It wasn't a life-threatening injury, but it was hardly 'fine' either: Ravage had gouged four slashes in the armor, deep enough to draw fluid. No lines were ruptured, or this couch would already be soaked, but Jazz still needed bandaging.

"Hold arm still," he instructed, and went to find the medkit. His casseticons were always beating one another senseless, and he was used to patching up minor injuries. Jazz was not the first one in this household to wear Ravage's claw marks, either. His oldest had always been jealous of new arrivals. Soundwave unwound a strip of magnetic mesh, then began to wrap it around Jazz's arm.

"Pain, very great?"

"It's alright." Jazz managed to shrug with just one shoulder, watching Soundwave with a curious look in his visor. "It's been a while since Ravage felt threatened enough to come after me with claws. Did something happen?"

"Negative. Ravage, prefers time alone with his master. Interruptions not welcomed."

"So noted. Maybe we should draw up a schedule. Ravage is the one creature in this house that I haven't been able to charm, and I don't want to be separated into tiny ribbons just because I ventilated on you."

"Only patience necessary. Ravage stubborn. Always develops affection for new additions eventually." By his own memory, Soundwave estimated it had been close to a vorn before Ravage accepted the older twins. The aerials had been much quicker, probably because they were quieter. He would grow to like Jazz eventually. Maybe two vorns?

"I can hardly wait," Jazz said dryly. "So what was all the cuddling about, anyway? Did he bring you bad news?"

"Negative." Soundwave hooked the end of the bandage firmly against Jazz's armor and sat back.

"News, not bad. Surveillance results of mid-vorn celebration, positive. No sign of protests, no reaction against Shockwave. Jazz's prediction, incorrect."

He handed the datapad to Jazz, who took it and promptly tossed it over his shoulder. "Soundwave, Soundwave. Do you know nothing about partying? Don't answer that. Like I was just telling the boys, the better the party, the bigger the hangover. But you can't expect it to start until the party's over. *Now* we start listening for unhappy chatter. Oh and, can I just say how immensely gratifying it is to see you taking my advice when it comes to running your surveillance?"

Grinning like a shark, Jazz leaned in very close and tickled him playfully under the chin. Soundwave stiffened defensively.

"Your comments, logically sound. Source, not a concern."

"Nice to be part of the team, even if Ravage hasn't gotten the memo. Should I leave? Does he want his spot back?"

Soundwave could still feel Ravage's pout radiating from the next room. Even with every other casseticon falling in love with Jazz, Ravage still resisted any notion of tolerance, let alone affection, between them. He always was the most stubborn.

"Negative. Stay here with me. Ravage will learn to share."

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"So, never?"

Soundwave's office had just one chair in it, and as it was currently occupied, Jazz had nowhere to sit.

This didn't seem to bother him in the least. After Soundwave had shooed him off the edge of his console - again - he made himself comfortable on the floor, using Soundwave's legs as a backrest.

When he tilted his head up to speak, Soundwave could see the amused grin dancing across his visor even without being able to see his mouth.

"Never," Soundwave repeated, just a little distractedly. He was busy putting the final touches on his report for the briefing, and not much time was left.

"Ever never?"

"As stated."

"Not once, in your whole life -"

"Jazz."

"Sorry, it's just taking a little while to sink in. I mean, I know you told me once before, but I didn't think you actually meant it. You *never lie*?"

"Affirmative." Soundwave ran a final check on his latest checks, matching them against his new report and checking for discrepancies. "Unnecessary, never practiced."

"But you're a Decepticon. It's built right into the name."

"Deception, separate matter. Misinformation fed to enemy, standard practice. Deception for war effort, often necessary. Lying for personal reasons, not. Soundwave, not Starscream."

Jazz's shoulders convulsed with a snort of laughter. "So you've never looked someone in the face, straight up, and told them an outright lie."

"Never." Done, at last. Soundwave downloaded the final result into a fresh datapad and locked it with a simple password.

"You know what I say to that?"

"Negative," Soundwave replied wearily. "Your response, not known."

Jazz twisted around so that he could perch his chin on Soundwave's knee, visor sparkling with wicked glee. "I say, he who only tells the truth is he who has no *imagination*. What a boring life; you have my pity. Is it time to go?"

"Affirmative." Soundwave nudged off Jazz so he could stand. "Reminder, good behavior expected."

"As always, my love. And that is the pure, paint-stripped truth."

---

The Seekers' briefing should not last too long, which was a good thing. As a non-flier who preferred his peace and quiet, there were few less pleasant places for Soundwave than a room full of restless jets, egos and wingspans jostling against one another for room. They'd been citybound for too long.

Their scheduled sweep of the planet had been delayed for the sake of the mid-vorn, and now they were jumpy, impatient, and eager to launch. It made Soundwave a little nervous to let Jazz loose on them, but he was, true to his word, actually being good. To all optics a submissive and obedient slave, he floated about the room with Fireflight and Groove, pouring some kind of fizzy, exotically flavored coolant. It was another new concoction of Mixmaster's that Soundwave didn't touch, though Rumble slurped his enthusiastically. When Jazz moved in to refill his canister, he bent over just enough to bring his lips close to Soundwave's audio.

"Is it just me," he murmured softly, "or does Starscream look 10% more calculating today than usual?"

Starscream looked to be absorbed in a private conversation with Megatron, not paying attention to anyone else. "Jazz, hush. Your duties require attention, nothing else."

"Suit yourself, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Jazz blew lightly against Soundwave's sensitive audio components, then took his leave. He wasn't two steps away when the light in Starscream's optics shifted and looked right at Soundwave, though

he was still speaking to Megatron. Something glinted, and in the next astrosecond he was paying full attention to Megatron again. Soundwave stiffened just a little, and reminded himself that this was only a simple briefing. Moreover, once it was over, Starscream and his fluttering flock would be gone for a time, and that would be pleasantly restful. He only had to endure this meeting.

"Quiet down," barked Starscream, and the rustlings and mutterings subsided. "So we can get on with things. As you all know, our regular tour of duty has been delayed -" he paused to shoot a meaningful look at Megatron, "- and it's critical that we make good use of our time. Parties and fun are over now; I expect everyone to pay close attention and do his job *right*. Incompetents and slackers will answer to me. We depart in 2.15 joors, all five trines engaged. Routes to be assigned. Soundwave?"

Rumble activated the briefing room's holo-display, bringing up a giant and well-detailed map of the planet. When Soundwave plugged in his report, glowing red dots speckled themselves across the surface. The purpose of the sweeps was a fairly simple one, for all Starscream liked to threaten his troops. In principle, Megatron had forbid Cybertronians from settling anywhere other than Iacon. In practice, Shockwave had convinced Megatron that scavenging the planet for usable metals and tools was absolutely necessary for the reconstruction of the city. And there were many poor mecha willing to do the deed. Eventually Megatron had relented, but only with the promise that all salvage teams were properly registered with Shockwave, and carried a permit. It was the Seekers' job to sweep the planet and perform permit checks; those without would be arrested on suspicion of starting illegal settlements. It was Soundwave's job to report all detected signal transmissions and give the Seekers a target for their hunting. Jazz muttered things about Shockwave finding yet another way to line his accounts, demanding high fees for the privilege of a salvage permit, but Soundwave had ignored him. Megatron's orders stood, and Soundwave followed orders.

"Transmissions detected at following coordinates." Soundwave began highlighting some of the dots by group. "Identical signal between some points. Likely same teams, multiple transmissions."

"Good." Starscream started carving up the map with a laser pointer. "Rainmaker trine, you'll hit these, and then these, and then these hotspots. Make a full loop past the remains of Praxus and return on the lee side of the planet. Cone trine, you'll take this route."

Dutifully Soundwave logged in Starscream's flight paths as he ordered them, which was not technically his responsibility, but it was the best method to ensure all targeted transmissions had been accounted for. Cybertron was a smaller planet than Earth, but there was still so much ground to cover. Every route was going to take several cycles, longer if they had to actually arrest anyone.

"Stop," Megatron interrupted, when Starscream had almost finished. "I don't like it. You've got the trines too far apart with too much lag time. Any illegal scavengers with a functioning set of wheels could evade detection, just by moving between zones."

Starscream looked like he might snap the laser pointer in half. "Air force deployment is my jurisdiction, Lord Megatron; don't tell me how to command my troops."

"Your troops are *my* troops, and don't you ever forget it. Your deployment has holes in it, Starscream. Fix it."

"This is the best I can manage," Starscream snarled. "You don't have the least idea of jet engine capacity or the prevailing atmosphere conditions, and our numbers are barely sufficient to cover the planet as is. Do you want me to fill the sky across all the planet?"

"I want you to actually think about the target of the mission and not treat it like a pleasure flight. Shockwave has concerns that illegal scavengers are evading enforcement."

“Shockwave can waste his own time hunting down scavengers without his silly permits then,” Starscream retorted. “It’s a waste of the Seekers’ time as it is.”

“If you’re volunteering them for other, more menial duties, I’m sure Shockwave and I can come up with something.”

Starscream’s engine growled dangerously at the not-so-veiled threat. “And I suppose you could do better than this, oh mighty Megatron?”

“I always do.” Megatron smirked at how that made Starscream’s wings twitch. “Widen the paths, Starscream. Have your jets swing back and forth rather than flying straight. It seems very simple.”

“That would take twice as long to complete the mission, and is a ridiculous waste of energy besides!”

“I control the energy on this planet, Starscream, it’s a waste when I say it’s a waste. Make the adjustments on the map; let’s see how much more ground gets covered.”

Starscream fumed, but did as he was told. A rapid blur of his hand across his console buttons wiped out the current flight paths and started charting new courses; curving lines began to sweep across the planet.

*“You really are lucky, Soundwave. You have no idea how much easier you have it, being Megatron’s golden boy.”*

Startled, Soundwave shot a quick look at Starscream. He was to all appearances lounging back in his seat, optics on the reformulating routes. He didn’t even glance at Soundwave. *“Why doesn’t he feel the need to peer over your shoulder, I wonder?”*

Soundwave estimated that it was the hundreds of vorns’ worth of competent service without ever trying to overthrow or murder his leader, but he kept silent. He’d learned a long time ago not to rise to Starscream’s baiting.

*“If Megatron belittled you publicly, I wonder if your trained pet would jump to your defense then too. I notice he always manages to protect you whenever I so much as look your way. Curious habit, for an Autobot, isn’t it?”*

*“Suggestion, focus on task at hand,”* Soundwave answered in spite of himself. *“Autobot, not your concern.”*

*“Oh but he is,”* Starscream assured him. He brought his drink to his mouth and tipped back the last of it. *“And who says I’m not? I’d say I have this task well in hand.”*

His optics met Soundwave’s just once, as he lowered the canister, gleaming eagerly over the rim, and then all his attention was on the map again. Idly, he raised one hand and snapped for a refill.

“There, Lord Megatron, I’ve recalculated with your parameters. Is this acceptable to you?”

“Much better, Starscream. I knew you could do it.” Megatron bestowed upon Starscream a patronizing smile that made Starscream’s optics smolder. “You always put up such a fuss, but when I really want something, you always find a way to give it.”

Soundwave thought Starscream might lose his temper and fly at Megatron right then and there, but somehow he managed to hold himself back. Engine still growling ominously, he closed a death grip around his canister while Jazz poured him his refill. Or perhaps he wasn’t holding back at all, just



waiting for an easier target to lash out against. Jazz barely had begun to step back when Starscream snatched him on the arm, right on Ravage's bandage, and squeezed hard. Jazz winced, but didn't make a sound.

"This - has - gone - flat - slave," Starscream bit out. With one spiteful flick of the wrist he threw the entire contents of his drink right into Jazz's face. "Go get more."

Jazz spluttered, taken by surprise, and Rumble uttered an indignant yelp. "Hey, he can't -"

*"Rumble, quiet."*

Tensely Soundwave watched Jazz wipe some of the liquid off his visor, ignoring the snickers of their audience. It must have been extraordinarily difficult for him, but his only response was to take a step back and bow.

"Yes sir. I'll get some more right away."

"See that you do."

Jazz promptly vacated the room, the other two slaves trotting after him, and Soundwave relaxed a little. But it didn't occur to him that Starscream's act had been anything but a minor tantrum until Starscream slipped him a quick smirk.

*"There, that's got rid of him. Now let's see how you handle yourself without your guardian comedian."*

Foreboding gripped Soundwave and he experienced the brief, illogical urge to *do* something, quick, though what could be done was something he had no way of knowing. Starscream didn't give him the chance anyway.

"It's true, Lord Megatron, the logistics of a planetwide sweep really aren't very easy to coordinate. Seekers are far better suited to short, quick flights. If *only* I had a servant designed for such travel, here to help."

Megatron granted Starscream one dark glare of warning. "Do you never get tired of reopening this argument, Starscream? You know I won't say yes. You know I'll never say yes. I put the slaves where they are for good reasons, and they stay where they are. How many *times* -" he flexed a fist suggestively, "- must I wrap your dented head around that fact?"

"Who knows? But it seems to me..." One more time Starscream canted a glance at Soundwave.

"Inconsistent. Tell me, Lord Megatron, why is it so unthinkable to move Skyfire into my custody, yet acceptable for Soundwave to steal the slave you granted to my trinemate?"

"WHAT?" screeched Rumble, taken by total surprise and instantly outraged. He jumped up on the console, hands balling into fists, and Soundwave snapped a warning.

*"Rumble, silence."*

*"But-"*

"Now." Outwardly, Soundwave kept his cool stare trained on Starscream. "Autobot, not stolen. Won fairly."

"If you say so, Soundwave," Starscream said airily, somehow managing to convey the exact opposite of his words' meaning. "But even so, Lord Megatron, isn't it true that you dealt out the

slaves for 'good reasons'? That you had a purpose in mind with every assignment? Surely Soundwave disrupted your plans when he stole I mean, won Jazz away from Skywarp."

An eager rustle moved through the watching Seekers, enunciating just how surrounded Soundwave was. In the corner of his vision, he could see Skywarp looking on hopefully, Thundercracker rubbing him between the wings for encouragement. Starscream's optics were glowing with vindictive triumph. And Megatron, much to Soundwave's horror, was looking at him rather thoughtfully.

"Skyfire's placement on Earth, due to large size," he pointed out quickly. "Jazz's placement with Skywarp, no such reason. Merely awarded for Skywarp's capture in field."

"So now you say our Lord Megatron *didn't* have good reasons for putting the slaves where he did."

"Negative, only that Jazz's placement -"

"I can understand your frustration, Soundwave." Unctuously Starscream spread his hands out on his console, leaning in just a little. "You served in the war as diligently as any of us, after all. And you were rewarded, just as you should have been. With no less than *four* Autobots, even. But somehow - and I'm sure it was an accident - you managed to kill all of them. I know you must have been upset, being the only officer without a slave of your own, but that doesn't give you the right to just take away what belongs to my trinemate."

Rumble was beginning to tremble with rage, and had to stuff his own hand into his mouth to keep from shouting something at Starscream. Soundwave could feel his spark crushing underneath Starscream's words, and tried to ignore the pain so he could focus. Jazz would have helped, somehow, but he wasn't here; Soundwave was on his own. Desperately he tried to seal off his haywire emotional subroutines.

"Autobot, not stolen," he repeated. "Transfer into my ownership, unexpected. Game only engaged on whim."

"You never go out, you don't play card games! You expect me to believe that you just happened to be in that nightspot and just happened to come upon my Seekers and just *happened* to join their card game?"

"Affirmative." Soundwave knew how strange it must sound, the way Starscream told it, but he wasn't lying. Soundwave did not ever have to lie. "That night, unexpected. Result, surprising... for all."

"Sure it was," Starscream scoffed. "Lord Megatron, I demand that you return Jazz to my trinemate immediately. Skywarp is one of your finest soldiers and deserves his reward for faithful service in battle. Soundwave does *not* deserve a fifth slave just because he was sloppy enough to kill off his first four."

Panic fluttered through Soundwave and he gripped the edge of his console in unconscious display of anger. "Starscream's demand, unwarranted. Only made out of frustration for inability to acquire Skyfire."

Megatron leaned back, still looking frighteningly thoughtful. "Well that's obvious enough, isn't it? But it's true he has a point. I don't think you actually set out to steal Skywarp's slave, but whatever happened that night, it happened without my permission. And I've told Starscream a thousand times since the end of the war that I put the Autobots exactly where I want them. Shuffling them about without my consent sets a bad precedent. I don't want Starscream thinking he can win back his

precious Autobot over a game of cards."

He favored Starscream with a particularly nasty smile, and Starscream narrowed his optics.

Soundwave realized too late he'd made a mistake; Megatron never caved to Starscream's whining, but in this case he was more determined to keep Starscream from Skyfire than he was bothered about giving back Jazz. Soundwave was on the brink of becoming a pawn in their unending squabble.

The panic got worse, and Soundwave fought the urge to snap at Megatron, '*Jazz mine!*'

"Final consideration for Megatron," he said evenly, "enslaved Autobots, valuable resource. Agreed?"

"Of course."

"Death of slave, undesirable."

"Much as I hate to admit it, yes."

"Skywarp's ownership of Jazz, likely to result in Autobot's deactivation. Habitually forgot to fuel slave, slow starvation already in progress before transfer of ownership. Constructicon Hook can verify; Jazz's death inevitable."

Skywarp gulped when Starscream shot him a swift but furious glare. Megatron raised an optic ridge. "Is that so?"

"Affirmative," Soundwave answered cautiously, aware he was holding his vents quite still.

"Testimony from Hook, obtainable if requested."

Megatron grunted and waved a hand. "There's no need to go that trouble, I believe it. This *is* Skywarp we're talking about."

Skywarp tried to look offended, but this time both his trinemates glowered at him and he ducked his head. Starscream realized he was losing ground and tried to rally.

"But- Soundwave has already proved he can kill off slaves too!"

"Those four little pipsqueaks? Who cares? They were useless for labor in the fuel camps and nobody would have wanted them in the berth. If Soundwave hadn't offered to take them, I'd have just had them shot."

Soundwave both felt and saw Rumble's flinch, and hoped no one else had. Determinedly he ignored his host carrier protocols. "In any case," Megatron was saying, "it's obvious enough that Jazz *isn't* dying under his care, as it seems he would have while in Skywarp's custody. He stays where he is. And Starscream, I'd advise you take a look at all the slaves on the Seekers' estate, and make sure they're not about to keel over either. Those slaves were the Empire's reward for military service, and I won't be pleased if they're on the brink of dying. That's not the kind of gratitude one shows for a gift."

Megatron stood, and Soundwave knew his leader well enough to know he was positively savoring the dumbfounded look on Starscream's face. "This briefing is over, you're all dismissed. Good flying, soldiers."

Everyone but Starscream bowed and Megatron swept out of the room, the clang of his footsteps disappearing into the general noise of headquarters. Very cautiously, Soundwave allowed his vents to open and exhale. Starscream's wingtips were trembling with muted rage, and Soundwave watched his hands curl into fists.

"Seekers, out! All of you. Prep for launch and get your pathetic afterburners to the departure point. One astrosec late and I'll make sure you all regret it. Skywarp, *don't move*."

Skywarp appeared to have been in the process of sneaking out, and flinched mid-step at Starscream's quiet snarl. Then Starscream fixed his glare on Soundwave.

*"Don't bother gloating just yet, golden boy. You know I don't give up easy and this is not over."*

*"Further efforts, not advised,"* Soundwave answered, before he could stop himself. *"Jazz, mine. Stay away."*

Starscream turned away with a haughty sniff and focused his attention on unlucky Skywarp, bearing down on him at rapid clip. Soundwave didn't pause to watch either berating or beating, but instead moved toward the side door. Rumble was already long gone. The passageway leading to a private fuel dispenser was empty, or at least it was when Soundwave entered it. He was only halfway through when Fireflight sprinted past, almost crashing into Soundwave and apparently not even noticing.

"Flight, wait!" Groove dashed after him, his optics pale with distress. He did notice Soundwave, and shot him a bitter, resentful look before he rushed past. Ten more steps brought him to the small dispensary room, with fuel and coolant storage facilities. Jazz was leaning against the far wall, visor shuttered. It was obvious enough he knew Soundwave had entered the room.

"Meeting over already, darling? Was it fun? Did I miss anything good?"

"Briefing, concluded. Come."

"I'll need you to take care of this first." Wan light flickered back on in Jazz's visor, and he pointed down. "Mind telling me why there's a Rumble attached to my leg?"

Sure enough, Rumble had wrapped himself around Jazz's left leg and was clinging for all he was worth. Soundwave vented a small sigh, and opened his chest.

"Rumble, return."

The response was a frantic shake of the head and an even tighter squeeze. "Rumble, return *now*. Disobedience, not recommended."

Soundwave was not precisely angry at Rumble, but his whirl of emotions sprung by Starscream's ambush had been most unhelpful. He did not have time to coddle his distress right now.

Soundwave wanted to be away from this place and in his home, with Jazz in it too, and he wanted to be there now.

Rumble sensed his impatience, and reluctantly peeled himself off Jazz's leg before folding up inside Soundwave's chest.

"Thaaat's better." Experimentally Jazz rotated his ankle cuff. "I'm sure fuel will return to that pede eventu- oh."

So said because Soundwave had just seized Jazz and hugged him close to his chest, not allowing him room to so much as wiggle his arms. His electropulse and sparkbeat kicked up briefly, but Jazz didn't panic at such embraces anymore. He didn't struggle, only waited patiently while Soundwave clung to his warmth, devouring it with unrestrained greed. He shouldn't be doing this here, in such a public place, shouldn't be lingering in this building for even an astrosec, but he couldn't help himself. Like Rumble, for just one moment he needed to reassure himself that Jazz was *his*.

"It's okay, master," Jazz whispered against the glass. "It's over. We can go home."

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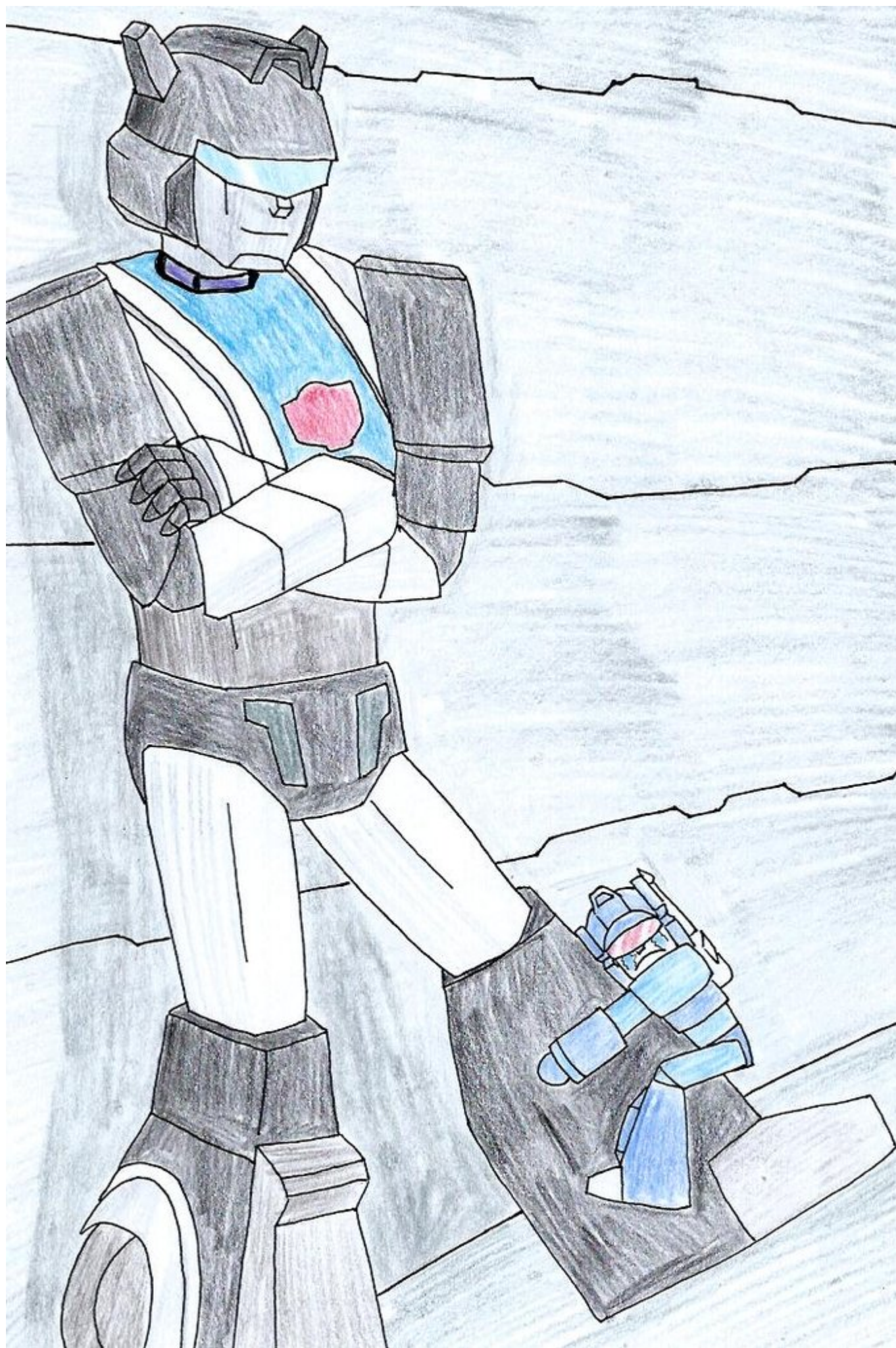
The Hangover, by Syntia13





Don't Leave Us, by FrostedIceFire









## on regret

*"Combien de temps," Jazz mumbled, "est-ce que ça va encore durer?"*

Soundwave glanced at the floor again, where Jazz lay crumpled underneath the weight of four distressed casseticons. None of them showed any signs of budging soon; Laserbeak and Buzzsaw were taking turns grooming one another, and Rumble and Frenzy were concentrating fiercely on one of their video games, thumbs jamming violently at the tiny buttons. All habits they indulged in when upset. Ordinarily it would have been upon Soundwave they took refuge, but not today. Jazz never even made it to the couch. He was still lying where the four of them, coordinated as only a mindlinked team could be, had tackled him to the floor.

"Patience requested. Current position, source of comfort."

*"For four of us, anyway." But he didn't try to sit up or shake any of them loose. "Kids are really freaked, aren't they?"*

"Affirmative," Soundwave answered cautiously. None of his symbiotes seemed bothered by Jazz's incomprehensible speech, still intent on their tasks.

*"I wonder why," Jazz murmured against the floor. "It was only Starscream, after all. I've watched them stand at his feet and spit insults without twitching. I've also watched them throw themselves against mecha six times their size in battle. Why, master, did they get so scared today?"*

Soundwave was silent, but Jazz didn't need him to answer. *"Is it because you were scared?"*

"Threat concluded now," Soundwave said quickly. "Jazz, still mine. Jazz safe."

Jazz's shoulders convulsed with a peculiar grunt of laughter, and Rumble and Frenzy kicked him without even taking their optics off the monitor. *"Did you... really just say that?"*

"Jazz, disagrees?"

*"Oh, not at all. I'm sorry I didn't say so earlier: thank you, master, for rescuing me from the horrible Decepticons. How will I ever repay you?"*

Soundwave looked sharply at Jazz, still helplessly trapped beneath his symbiotes. Jazz wasn't in a position where he could quite look back, but Soundwave knew he must be able to see him. A slow, sarcastic smile spread across that face. *"Will you, perhaps, accept my body as payment? It's being used just now, as a couch, but I'm sure I can pencil you in for later."*

"Your meaning, not understood," Soundwave said irritably.

*"I'm not surprised."*

Jazz's smile vanished, and he deflated a little under the weight of the cassettes. *"You should have had to see their faces, Soundwave. Groove and Fireflight were so excited when they told me what Starscream was trying to do, so happy that they might have the chance to get me back. They're only kids, you know. Much, much younger than your kids - the humans would call them babies. They've never known anything but war, and this."*

A small sigh. *"All they wanted was for me to come back, and protect them like I used to. You should have had to see their faces when I warned them it probably wouldn't happen, that you*

*wouldn't let it happen. When Rumble flew in and latched himself onto me, I knew it for sure. You broke their sparks today, and you don't even know it. You don't even care."*

He spoke so softly, his tone so even and calm. None of the cassettes were bothered in the least, nobody even looked at him. Carefully Soundwave wove together a lock on his emotions, eased into place before any of his symbiotes could feel the hurt cracking open inside him.

"Your health and wellbeing while here, superior. Jazz, not starved. Not beaten. Not... forced."

*"Yes. And every day the rest of my friends are, while I play here in your gilded dollhouse. Does that make me a traitor, I wonder? It's so easy to forget what I am, lately, and what you are too. Oh Soundwave. Won't you hit me just once? Help me remember what I'm supposed to be."*

"Negative," Soundwave said stiffly. "Request declined."

*"Then I wish you had picked one of them instead of me."*

Soundwave stood up too quickly; Laserbeak canted her head and shot him a quizzical look. He held his emotions well in check, and spoke impassively. "That decision, not yours. Jazz must be mine."

*"What a good thing you never bothered to ask me, then."*

"Your answer, of no interest to me."

*"And you say you never lie."*

Soundwave made for the security of his office, long steps carrying him away from Jazz. He ignored the brief flickers of unease from his symbiotes.

*"Tell them to get off, Soundwave, s'il vous plaît. I can't move."*

"Cassetticons, stay with Jazz until you like." Soundwave let the door slam shut behind him.

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*From almost two leagues distant, Soundwave watched the sleek black form racing across the landscape. Speed was impressive, and by engaging his macrovision he could see the creature's powerful struts devouring the distance. Movements were smooth and well-oiled, and his strength self-evident. A worthy addition to his collection, and perhaps quite timely. The new twins were turning out to be... rather more lively than he'd been expecting. Their immunity to discipline was alarming. Soundwave had no doubt that they would settle down and learn to behave themselves in a vorn or two, but in the meantime they were making Ravage's life miserable.*

*Soundwave watched the cassette model gather himself and leap into the air, achieving some spectacular height before his jaws clamped down on a spinning metal disc. This new creature's build was very similar to Ravage's, probably just as old, and would bear the same minimal functioning vocalizer. He could be a companion to Ravage, someone with whom to race and hunt, and hopefully cheer him up. Soundwave hadn't planned on acquiring another symbiont so soon, but the more he thought about it, the better the idea became.*

*However, he realized, he might already be too late. As he watched, the cassette turned a wide oval*

*and came sprinting back to his starting point, bearing the disc like a trophy in his mouth. The mech who'd tossed it was laughing, the carefree sound of it carrying even to this distance. Red, gold, and white color scheme, designation Blaster. Soundwave had met him before. He was one of his own model, a rare find lately, and still relatively new to the world. He was too young to be collecting symbionts already, but Soundwave watched him run a circle around the cassette model, teasing the smaller creature into a game of tag. Happily he dashed forward and pounced on the red mech, tail whipping back and forth in feline delight.*

"Optics off, Monotone."

*Soundwave almost started. He hadn't realized he'd been seen, from such a far distance, and he'd caught no warning that his comm channel had been hacked. Perhaps Blaster was more advanced than he'd realized.*

"Steeljaw's mine," *Blaster continued, still wrestling playfully on the ground with the creature in question. "So you can just go hunting elsewhere."*

"Symbiosis formed?" *Soundwave asked coolly, as if he had no interest in the matter at all.*

"Not yet. But it's coming, so don't you worry about that. Me and Jaw, we got ourselves somethin' solid. We do disc-golf."

*Whatever that was. Soundwave lifted his chin unconsciously. "Soundwave, superior."*

"Tell yourself whatever you like, Johnny One-Note, but Jaw's with me. He's got better things to do than serve a mech who keeps company with Decepticons."

*Impertinent upstart. Soundwave was tempted to flatten him against the wall with a well-aimed cannon shot, then steal the handsome cassette model just to spite him. But Steeljaw was pressing his head up so eagerly underneath's Blaster's hand, nuzzling against his armor with plain affection. He had already formed strong loyalties for Blaster, and would resist Soundwave. Resistance could be broken, but that was not something Soundwave had time for, not with all the tasks his new clients demanded of him. Just this once, he acknowledged unhappily, he would have to admit defeat.*

"Soundwave departing," *he informed Blaster loftily. "Future confrontations, not recommended."*

"I got no vacation plans in Kaon. See you around, like, never." *Steeljaw bounded away from Blaster, dancing with anticipation, and Blaster reared back before hurling the spinning disc item again. It flew hard and fast, and Steeljaw shot after it. He was every bit as swift and graceful as Ravage, and Soundwave indulged in a little pointless wistfulness. If only he had more time...*

"He's not yours. He'll never be yours. You'll always lose."

Soundwave woke up with no memory of going into recharge. His chronometer baffled him, now ahead by more than a joor, and all his console monitors had gone dark. Power outage? No, curfew had passed, and the grid was down for the night. Sensors were spinning with fresh data, the proximity and status of his symbiotes flipping through his processor in rapid succession. Ravage and the younger twins were out on their patrols; Rumble and Frenzy over in the next room. Which meant it was someone else's hands cupping his jaw to tilt up his face, wiping a cloth across his visor.

"Hey," Jazz said softly. "Finally awake?"

“Jazz, not allowed in this room.”

“Then why’d you lock it with such a simple code? C’mon, let’s go to berth. If you’d had the consideration to be a little smaller, I’d have just carried you there twenty breems ago.” Without waiting for an answer Jazz draped Soundwave’s arm over his shoulders and hauled him to standing.

“Jazz, missed feeding time.”

“Oh, be quiet.” Jazz tugged him out of the office and back toward his personal chamber, passing through the common room. The twins were on the couch, peacefully asleep, but not on top of one another like usual. “Took ‘em long enough to fall off me,” Jazz complained. “Going into recharge was the only thing that would make them let go. They didn’t wake up when I put them on the couch. Rough day for the brats.”

Soundwave allowed Jazz to sit him down on his berth, and Jazz allowed Soundwave to feed him. After that, silence. Very little of Jazz was visible in the mostly-dark room, but to Soundwave the dim glow in his visor seemed troubled.

“I connived Rumble into telling me exactly what happened today, after I left the room. Exactly which dirty potshot Starscream took at you and Primus, can he shoot dirty. You’re so hopeless, Soundwave. You can’t keep on falling to pieces every time he tries to nail you on the cassetibots. He’s not stupid. Sooner or later he’s going to figure out that it’s more than just an embarrassment to you.”

“That subject, not welcome.”

“Tell that to Starscream. You can’t order it silenced, Soundwave, it’s not helping you and it’s not helping your brats. They were clinging to me for a *reason* tonight, because they were terrified. Scared of losing me, yes, but terrified of you.”

“Assertion, incorrect. Violence never used against symbiotes.”

“I know you’d never hit them. But what’s going on in here?” Jazz knelt beside him, cupping Soundwave’s face in his hands. “What are you doing to yourself in that head of yours? You blame yourself for what happened, and you hate yourself so much that you can’t even bear to talk about it. You can’t even hear it without breaking into pieces. Do you think they can’t feel that? They don’t want to get sucked back into whatever black hole you were dwelling in before I came into this home.”

Soundwave still felt oddly disoriented, as if his sensors hadn’t properly synchronized. Images and sounds and tactile input were all disconnected; Jazz’s voice seemed very far away, but his hands were warm against his own plating, and the blue glow of his visor very close. Closer. Before Soundwave realized it was happening Jazz had tipped his own forehead against Soundwave’s and stayed there.

“It wasn’t your fault, Soundwave. I can blame you for so many other things and I will, but this much, what you tried to do for his little bots – it *wasn’t your fault*.”

“Negative. Responsibility mine. Survival of cassetibots dependent on me.”

“You are killing yourself every time you repeat that, and you’re dragging the rest of them down with you. Stop it. You did everything you could. Blaster couldn’t have done any better.”

Blaster. Unease whirled inside Soundwave at the name, making his disorientation even worse. It wasn’t a proper recharge cycle, something had gone wrong with his defragmentation. It was like the

phenomenon Jazz described, spontaneous archived memory file playback, but something about the file was wrong. Blaster never said that last warning... did he? *He'll never be yours*, the words echoed cruelly in his mind. *You'll always lose*.

Soundwave covered Jazz's hand with his own, holding it in place out of the momentary and entirely illogical fear that if he didn't, Jazz would vanish into thin air.

"Cassettibots, preferred pain and suffering over me. Jazz, prefers pain and suffering over me. Conclusion: unpleasant to acknowledge."

"I never said I *wanted* to go back." Jazz's hand curled into his. "There are just... so many other things I have to think about. This is hard for me too, you know. It's been a confusing slavery."

Jazz's exhalations were light against his dermal plating. Soundwave felt the tickle of contact, and what might have been Jazz's lips brushing softly against the edge of his mask. The world tilted, and Soundwave vaguely realized that Jazz was pushing him to lie down on the berth.

"This way is a little more comfortable, don't you think? Try to go back into recharge. You'll feel better tomorrow."

He would if only Jazz would be in his arms when he woke, but that wasn't going to happen. Soundwave felt the warmth and pressure of Jazz's body settle on his chest, and knew it would not be there in the morning. But for now, with the room still rocking dizzily around him and Blaster's voice echoing in his mind, it was enough. He wrapped his arms around Jazz, and initiated shutdown.

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One, two, three. One, two, three. Step, step, skip. Step, step, skip. Idly Soundwave counted as Jazz half-danced past the stalls, watching his pedes tap against the ground in perfect sync with nearby music. The rhythm could be broken down into counts of three, that much he understood, even if he still didn't find its assault against his audios pleasing in the slightest. But sometimes the underlying mathematical count was interrupted by an unpredictable anomaly, or at least Soundwave thought it unpredictable. He didn't understand how Jazz could so deftly skip in time with the anomaly that, by rights, did not fit with the three-count.

One, two, three. One, two, three. One-two-threeeee-four-five. Jazz slid, spun, and didn't miss a beat.

"This song, well known to you?"

"Nope! First time I've heard it. Must be new from Earth; I like it though." Step, step, *skip*. Step, step, *skip*. Then how did he know about the coming anomaly? It wasn't predictable. It didn't fit the expected pattern. How did he know?

"Jazz, desires this file?"

He threw a carefully careless grin back over his shoulder. "Nah. Some other time, maybe. It's enough to just dance to it here and now."

Jazz hadn't played his own music since that night on the roof. Soundwave had listened for it, but Jazz seemed content to dance to the music out here.

"Jazz, enjoyed playing favorite song?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

"Jazz will play own music again, when?"

"Oh, I don't know." Jazz turned in a slow, easy twirl. "Maybe when you stop being such a buzzkill all the time. Or when you can even tell me what 'buzzkill' means. We'll see."

"Your meaning, not understood."

"You're still moping, Soundwave, and it's cramping my style. Can't you bounce already? They're waitin' for it. We all are." Jazz pointed up, where Laserbeak and Buzzsaw were gliding over the stalls. "You could at least try and enjoy the walk. I am. Because A, it's the first time I've been able to take a step in seven cycles without at least one of the brat pack clinging to me and B, it's the last cycle we have to enjoy Iacon without a chance of running into annoying Seekers. Isn't that in itself worth a little smile?"

He tipped Soundwave's chin up, as if he could even see through Soundwave's battle mask. "My appearance, always impassive," Soundwave reminded him, lifting free of Jazz's touch. "Jazz, no expert at knowing my emotions."

"Yes I am."

Jazz smirked and sashayed away again. "If you insist on keeping up this funk, I have no choice but to up the game. Hasn't it been a while since it got lively? We're overdue for a shake-up."

"Jazz, don't."

"Hold back? If you insist!" Soundwave thought about lunging at Jazz to grab his arm, but Jazz was faster. Step, step, *skip* up onto the stacks of crates he went. One, two, three. Hop, grab a pole, and swing up onto the narrow crown of a wall - Jazz made every movement into a dance no matter what. The regulars, delighted to see their favorite acrobat in a mood to show off, whistled and cheered. Predictably, Laserbeak lit up with anticipation, and swooped closer. Soundwave sighed.

"Jazz, always seeking attention."

"Seek? I beg your pardon, darling, but I don't ever have to go looking for attention. It finds me without much trouble." His dance steps were more complicated now. He hopped, skipped, and twirled along the extremely slim wall, followed by a few cartwheels - blasted chains held him back not at all - and various other forms of tumbling. Soundwave had learned a long time ago not to worry that he'd fall, because he wouldn't.

"If not attention, then state objective."

"To annoy you or cheer you up, I'm not really sure which. Who cares? The point is I can, and so I do. It's a point well worth taking."

That didn't seem much of a point at all to Soundwave, but it was no good arguing with Jazz while he was in one of his illogical moods. Soundwave watched him tip hand over pede, then spring off the end of the wall in a twisting aerial that dropped him back to the ground in a neat crouch.

Right in front of Megatron.

Later, Soundwave would play back the scene and still not be able to determine which one of them was more surprised. Megatron stared, optics bright and startled, and Jazz jumped back as if he'd landed on melting magma. Giant Megatron, with his heavy armor and even heavier tread, was usually easy to hear coming, but downtown Iacon was noisy and he'd just rounded the bend of the wall. He certainly hadn't been expecting an Autobot to fall down out of the sky. It was a mutual ambush.

"Impressive show, Autobot," Megatron appraised, when he'd recovered. Jazz, never one to miss a beat, dipped into a low and gracious bow.

"If you knew me, Herr Megatron, you'd know putting on a show is what I do best."

"I don't doubt it." Casual fingertips played over Jazz's face, then lower to the neck, not exploring but remembering. Jazz held himself perfectly still, but didn't lower his gaze for a second.

"No pet today, my lord?"

Megatron was alone on the walkway. He smirked. "Bluestreak is still *self-repairing* at home."

"I was talkin' about Shockwave."

Megatron looked a bit torn whether to chuckle or smack Jazz straight into the wall. Luckily, that moment was when everyone else noticed their lord's unexpected presence as well.

"All hail Lord Megatron!" gasped the nearest vendor, and the awareness carried through the crowd like an electric shock. "All hail Lord Megatron!" they chorused. "Long live the Decepticon Empire!"

Megatron turned his attention to the adoring crowd, shoving Jazz aside with one effortless swipe. Jazz stumbled out of the way, vents exhaling in relief, and smiled rather shakily at Soundwave.

"I must say, I'm pleased to see you out and about, Soundwave," Megatron said affably, after he'd gifted the crowd with his wave. "Seems I never see you outside headquarters, and hardly ever there either. After so much work to win control of this planet, you're the only Decepticon that won't come out to appreciate it."

Soundwave bowed. "Responsibilities time consuming, Lord Megatron. Enjoyment taken when possible."

"I'm glad to hear it." Megatron motioned for Soundwave to fall in with him, and they continued past the stalls. Soundwave just barely glimpsed Jazz shadowing them off to the side.

"Reason here, Lord Megatron? Problem evident?"

"No, just enjoying the city before the Seekers return. And why shouldn't I walk amongst the common rabble now and then? I am not the Council, Soundwave. Don't ever forget it."

"Understood, Lord Megatron."

"It doesn't hurt either," he added, patting his cannon smugly, "to remind them who their leader is. A little fear keeps them properly respectful. Another concept the old Council couldn't grasp. I certainly

approve of showing off your slave to the crowds; reminds them what the price of defiance is. Though I can't understand why he was jumping off the wall."

Soundwave fumbled for an answer, but fortunately Megatron didn't expect one. "I was, to be honest, rather surprised how forceful you were about keeping that one. Not that I mind, but don't you find him irritating to have around? I prefer a slave that's perfectly obedient... except for when I want a slave that's not obedient at all." A dark smile flickered across his face as he considered his two slaves. "Prime's spy somehow manages to be the worst of both worlds. It's annoying. How can you stand him outside the berth?"

In the corner of his vision, Soundwave watched Laserbeak alight on Jazz's offered arm, and Jazz feed her some treat from a stall. "Slave, amuses casseticons."

"Hmph. I suppose he would. Better you than me, at any rate. Just make sure to watch that attitude of his. I never mind saving something to break later, but we can't have him getting too comfortable in the meantime. Next thing you know, he might be happy. And that's not what I have in mind for those Autobots. Not at all."

He dismissed Soundwave with a flick of the hand, turning his magnanimous attentions back to the crowd. Soundwave bowed, staying put while Megatron strode on. Anyone without a stall to tend rushed past him, eagerly following in Megatron's wake. When he'd turned a corner and was no longer in sight, Soundwave retreated back to the shadowed corner where Jazz lurked.

"Whew!" Jazz said cheerfully. "Now doesn't that make the fuel pump jump up the throat? I wanted to make things lively, but I didn't expect them to get *that* lively."

"Jazz's comment to Megatron regarding Shockwave, insolent and unwise."

"You'll notice he didn't exactly deny it. You'll also notice he came out on this walk alone. Even Megatron can only take so much pedelicking. So what'd you two crazy kids talk about?"

"Not your concern."

"Fine, be stingy. The twins and I were having a nice time without you anyway." He tickled Laserbeak under her beak. "I'd love to know how you explained my gymnastics to Megatron, though."

"Megatron's unexpected presence, a good example why such displays inappropriate in public. Will not be repeated in future."

"Soundwave, you're so cute when you're being hopefully optimistic."

Laserbeak's amusement chattered across the link, and she quickly launched back into the air when Soundwave shot her a pulse of disapproval. "Anyway, I did overhear that Megatron would also like to see you out and about more. What a coincidence: Megatron and I actually agree on something. You know what that means, of course."

Soundwave suddenly felt rather exhausted, and wished he were home in his peaceful loft.

"Negative," he said wearily. "Meaning?"

"That the world's about to end," Jazz said matter-of-factly. "Hope you're ready for it."

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## on mutiny

It was the first emergency comm that Soundwave had received since the end of the war. When it hit, it hit like lightning, the classified frequency automatically triggering a surge of energy through all his systems. Recharge shut off mid-cycle, all priority shoved into rapid boot-up, and Soundwave was sitting up before he'd even properly realized he was awake. Old habits borne of long centuries had his battle protocols humming, weapons ready to activate and fire at will. He was momentarily bewildered by his own civilian berth chamber, expecting to be back in his old cabin on the warship.

"Mngh," Jazz grunted, and rolled away from Soundwave over onto his side. "Thereshno way iss time to wake up. Lemmelone."

The war was over. This was his home, quietly untroubled by battle sirens, and had Jazz been sleeping at his side? Soundwave was still scrambling through his disorientation when the comm alert was followed by Shockwave's transmission.

*"Soundwave. Report to Headquarters immediately."*

*"Nature of emergency? Attack, possible?"*

*"Just get here."* Shockwave's voice lacked its usual pompous flourish, and was instead somber and urgent. *"Don't delay."*

*"Understood."*

In theory, Shockwave had no business ordering Soundwave to headquarters in such a manner, but Soundwave sensed it was no personal insult. What could have happened to make Shockwave sound like that? He laid a hand on Jazz's shoulder, wishing he could reconstruct what happened while he was distracted by the alert. He was almost sure Jazz had been sleeping curled up at his side.

"Jazz."

"Mmm?"

"Presence in Headquarters necessary. Stay, remain in recharge."

"Mmm."

His system rotations were already slow and deep; he'd never booted up. If he had, he probably would have thrown a fit and insisted on coming too. Grateful, Soundwave stood and left the room. Everybody else was out except for the elder twins, who were sleeping together on the couch. He paused to scoop up the one on top, which happened to be Frenzy, and continued on his way to the balcony.

"Huh?" Clearly nobody else had gotten the alert. Groggily Frenzy groped his way toward consciousness, snuggling into a crevasse on Soundwave's shoulder when plopped there. "Whas goin' on?"

"Unknown. Presence at Headquarters demanded; nature of problem, urgent." Soundwave kicked on his thrusters and soared into the night, over the peacefully sleeping Iacon.

"Can't be that bad; everybody *else* gets to stay in recharge."

"Complaints, unproductive. Suggestion, wait to judge scale of emergency."

Frenzy made grumbling noises, but didn't speak again for the rest of the journey. Decepticon Headquarters was mostly empty; all but a few monitors and stations shut down in the night and Shockwave kept few nocturnal staff. Only the classified command room itself would be powered up, and Soundwave went straight for it. The entire building was silent and dim, peaceful as the city outside. So when Soundwave keyed open the door, Megatron's howl of rage almost startled him into jumping. Frenzy flinched and cowered into his armor.

"- WILL KILL THEM. I will find them, I *will*. I will hunt them down and rip the metal off their struts! They think they can do this to me? They think they can steal from *me*? Make no mistake, Decepticons, I *will kill them*."

With one hand he ripped a heavy chair from its wheel track and hurled it across the room. It crashed into a desk, and this time everyone jumped. Starscream's optics had blanched and he was keeping very still, drawing on long experience to keep himself out of Megatron's crosshairs. Even Shockwave, for all he had no face, managed to look rather shaken. He noticed Soundwave's arrival and beckoned him closer, waiting until Soundwave had reached the top level before speaking in a decidedly low voice.

"Soundwave, at last. We've, er, had a bit of a problem on Earth. Megatron is not pleased."

"No joke," Frenzy whispered. "What happened?"

"Motormaster is in the best position to answer that." Shockwave looked to the holo-display table, where, sure enough, the Stunticon was waiting. He looked both utterly miserable and furious, shoulders hunched in shame but fists curling with telltale rage.

"Motormaster, report."

"You want to know what happened, Soundwave?" Megatron snarled, just as Motormaster was opening his mouth. He stopped by the table and slapped a hand against it, causing the image to wobble and flicker. "I'll tell you what happened. Those malcontent mercenaries robbed me. That pathetic, useless, dysfunctional team of thieves and sadists invaded *my* colony and stole one of *my* slaves. My property! I'll snap every one of their heads off for that! Their own incompetence in tracking and capturing Mirage was not an excuse to take any Autobot they liked!"

Frenzy's shock rebounded against his own, stunning them both for a nanoklik. He could practically feel Frenzy's jaw drop.

"No way..." he exhaled. Megatron did not hear him, luckily, and turned away with a growl. Soundwave better understood the mood of the room now. No wonder Starscream looked so ashen. Even he wasn't stupid enough to fly to Earth and simply steal Skyfire.

Again Soundwave looked to Motormaster. "Report details."

"Yes, Motormaster, do give us details," Shockwave added, coolly. "Explain how a broken gestalt team managed to invade the Decepticon fuel camp, fend off your complete gestalt team, and steal one of Megatron's slaves... right in front of you."

Motormaster's engines snarled at Shockwave's tone. "I wasn't there. So no, the team was not complete. Menasor couldn't help."

"Then where were you?"

"I was out east, looking for Sideswipe. Like I was ordered to. I *told* Megatron-" Shockwave stiffened and glanced at Megatron, pacing across the deck, and Motormaster quickly rephrased himself. "I did worry that leaving the camp could have its problems. But I thought the problem would come from the slaves themselves - I didn't think anybody would come barreling down out of the sky to steal one! How could I have known?"

"Circumstances of theft?" Soundwave interposed, before Shockwave countered with something unproductive. "Recording captured?"

"Every corner of the compound is covered by some camera." Motormaster punched a button, and a second image popped up over the table. The video clip showed them all how Blast Off had hurtled down into the center of the well field, and how Vortex circled around, guns blazing while Brawl and Swindle burst out, grabbed the Autobot, and hauled him back into the hold. The Stunticons were taken by total surprise and scrambled to mount a clumsy counterattack, but the Combaticons weren't interested in a fight. Almost as soon as Blast Off touched down, his thrusters roared back to full power and he rocketed back into the sky. It was over in less than a breem.

What the video clip did not show was *why*. "Motivation for Combaticons' actions, known?"

"How in the Pit should I know? It's not as if they left a fragging note."

"Which Autobot was it?" Starscream asked. "They're all filthy, it's impossible to tell which one is which."

"The scout, Hound. He was one of the quiet ones, never made any trouble." Motormaster shrugged. "Dunno if they were gunning for him in particular, or they just grabbed the first bot they could put their grubby hands on."

"Never mind which bot it was," Shockwave said tersely. "We have mechanisms in place to prevent our slaves from getting 'lost', whether it was their idea to flee or not. Why did you not track the signal on his collar?"

"I did! My team commed me right away and we pinpointed the signal, all the way out in the middle of Russia. By the time we got there, this was all that was left." He held up Hound's abandoned collar, the thin wires dangling uselessly.

Starscream swore. "Vortex."

"He has enough expertise for such a procedure?" Shockwave was surprised. "Hook assured me that only a medic could properly extract the induction wires."

"He has the expertise alright," Starscream said flatly. "He's not a medic, but he's had a few thousand chances to explore the inside of a Cybertronian. Whether Hound is still functional - or alive - is anyone's guess."

"I hear speculation," Megatron snapped, pausing to glare their way. "I hear theories. What I don't hear are my top officers taking steps to fix it. I don't care which bot they stole or how they got his collar off. I care about tracking them down and hauling their rusted hides in front of me so I can get on with making them very, *very* sorry. Make it happen!"

"My lord." Shockwave bowed and backed away from the holo table. "You can be sure that we will do everything in our power to restore your stolen property, and bring the Combaticons to justice."

"Oh, I know you will. Or everyone's going to be sorry."

What was left of the night cycle passed rather tensely. Megatron did at least stop throwing things and screaming, but his presence in the command room was a dark, brooding one that made concentration difficult. Soundwave did his best, working with Frenzy to sort through video feeds from various satellites around Earth, scanning for Combaticon activity. Shockwave roused Astrotrain and Blitzwing and sent them through the space bridge, waiting for any coordinates to give chase, while Starscream's Seekers stood by on alert for backup. The more Soundwave and Frenzy looked, though, the more unlikely it seemed they were still on Earth at all.

"Here's what I don't get," Frenzy complained, after pulling up another feed, "why Hound? I kinda get the rest of it - they're frustrated and desperate. The other gestalts have slaves and status and estate, and they got nothin'. And the empire's slaves are right there on Earth, easy pickings. It's stupid and suicidal, but I get why they wanted to steal one. But why Hound? He's not even that good looking. He's okay, I guess, but not nearly as fine as Jazz - or Mirage. Don't think I've ever seen him without mud on his plates. Is it worth risking Megatron's rage over some dusty bot? They had to have known he'd be this mad."

"Hound, not necessarily target," Soundwave reminded him, but Frenzy was already shaking his head.

"No, I think he was. I keep looking at this clip." He moved aside the satellite feed and called up the footage again. With a fingertip he followed the image of Brawl and Swindle throwing themselves at Hound. "I'm telling you, they went straight for him. That bot over there, he's just as close, but smaller, and wouldn't smaller be easier? I think they picked Hound for a reason."

It wasn't so obvious to Soundwave, but at this point nothing could be ruled out. What could the Combaticons be thinking? Just one klik in a room with any of them and he'd have an answer. Too bad that wasn't likely to happen anytime soon. Soundwave froze an image of Blast Off hurtling himself away from Earth.

"Lord Megatron, surveillance of Combaticons located." Everyone's head snapped up.

"And?"

"Combaticons, no longer on Earth. Recording captured of Blast Off exiting atmosphere. Launch point: northern Russia. Combaticons attacked Decepticon oil reserves after removing slave's collar, then departed planet."

"To go," Megatron snarled, "where?"

"Tracking vector, but destination unknown. Their course likely to change, regardless."

"Well can't you track a signal?"

Soundwave made sure to keep his gaze steady. "Combaticons have no reason to transmit signal. Unlikely to, knowing danger. Team a gestalt, transmissions unnecessary for communication. Currently, no way to locate Combaticons."

The arms of Megatron's chair crumpled in his clenched fists, and Frenzy edged behind Soundwave just a little.

"I am disappointed, Soundwave. I'm disappointed in *all* of you," he added, casting meaningful looks at Starscream and Shockwave. "Is this the extent of the talents of my elite officers? You're supposed to be helping run my empire! You can't even stop a rogue gang of cons from stealing a

simple slave. Pathetic.”

Shockwave stammered something about the responsibility of the Stunticons to guard the fuel camps, and Starscream was quick to start listing what the Combaticons' next move might be, but Soundwave simply sat down again. He never offered an excuse when he had failed Megatron, which was rare. What was the point? Nothing could undo failure.

Frenzy laid a hand on his arm. “It wasn’t your fault, boss. There wasn’t nothin’ you could have done, not from another planet. Not your fault the Combaticons finally went off the deep end.”

“This fact, known. Megatron’s frustration, not so logical.”

“Tell me about it.” Frenzy cocked his head in response to a comm. “Rumble and Jazz are up. Rumble wants to know if he can bring Jazz over; he thinks Jazz is hungry.”

Yes, he would be; it was time for his morning feeding. Soundwave glanced sideways at Megatron and wondered if it was appropriate for Jazz to enter this room. Megatron hadn’t officially classified this event, but he probably wouldn’t appreciate Autobots overhearing it. Soundwave wasn’t going to risk his temper. “Affirmative. Instruct Rumble to wait outside command room.”

“Yo.”

---

Soundwave was relieved to escape the command room four breems later, when Rumble alerted him to their arrival. Megatron had already stormed out, back to his personal quarters to unleash his frustration on his slaves, but that did nothing to ease the tensions still in the room. Starscream and Shockwave couldn't quite figure out if they wanted to bicker with one another about what happened, or unite in mutual blameshifting to the Stunticons, and everyone's tempers were short. By the time low-ranked Decepticons and civilians were filtering into the building for their shifts, none of the top three officers was even pretending to work. Out in the grand antechamber, Soundwave saw Starscream clustered in the corner with his trine, avidly passing on the gossip.

There was Rumble, fidgeting restlessly as he waited for them to exit the command room, knowing something important had happened and resentful he'd been left out. Jazz was much further back toward the exit, taking advantage of Rumble's inattention to sneak a quick handhold with Windcharger while Scrapper was occupied in conversation.

"Glad that's over with," Frenzy exulted, stretching as they left the room and popping a few joints.

"Now comes the fun part! Pleease let me be the one to tell Rumble, kay? I can't wait to see the look on his face when I tell him what the Combaticons did. He'll fragging fall over!"

Without waiting for an answer he skipped ahead, brimming over with gleeful anticipation. Rumble met their approach with defiant hands on hips. “Hey, there you guys are. How come you left us behind? I would have woken up if you wanted me to!”

“Only one assistant necessary, other twin needed to stay with Jazz.”

“But how come I had to –“

“Never mind that,” Frenzy interrupted impatiently. “Don’t you want to know what the emergency was? You will *not* believe this.”

Rumble perked up. “What, what? Tell me!”

“If you insist.” Frenzy’s grin was stretching from side of the hallway to another. “You remember the Combaticons? Well guess what they decided to do. Last night, on Earth, they invaded Megatron’s fuel camps... and *stole Hound*. They just touched down, grabbed him, and took off! Can you believe it!”

Rumble’s reaction was not the delighted disbelief Frenzy was anticipating. Thoughtfully, hesitantly, he frowned. “Huh. That’s... weird.”

“It’s more than weird, it’s fragging suicidal!” Frenzy punched Rumble on the arm. “C’mon, how stupid was that? Megatron’s been threatening to twist off their heads all night. I knew they were a little bit off their servos before, but this time they’ve finally flipped their bits. They’re crazy. Why else would they do something so glitched-up stupid?”

“Well, yeah, of course they’re crazy. It’s just that Jazz said...”

Soundwave, who had been monitoring Jazz and only listening to the conversation with one audio, suddenly snapped to full attention. “Jazz, said what?”

Rumble sensed the sharp spike in Soundwave’s interest and promptly got nervous, optics paling. “I mean, it’s not like he meant it. I don’t think. I didn’t even really pay attention at the time because he was just teasing Decepticons. It’s Jazz – it’s what he does. I didn’t think they were listening to him and even if they were –“

“Rumble.” Soundwave snapped his fingers, breaking Rumble out of his loop. “They, who?”

“The Combaticons.” Rumble’s voice had gotten very small. “That day you left me in charge of him... they ran into us on the stairs. He was making his jokes, like always, and I swear I didn’t think he meant anything by it.”

“Meant anything by *what*?” wailed Frenzy, now the frustrated one. Soundwave’s gaze returned to Jazz again, who caught his stare and waved merrily. Rumble’s anxiety was exploding across the link.

“I was recording. It’s better just to show you.”

“Reason for recording?”

“Always do, in case Jazz does something really awesome.”

Looking rather shellshocked, Rumble folded down into his alt-mode and slotted into Soundwave’s open chest.

*"Watch it, half-bit!"*

*The collision had been painful, the swat that sent him crashing to the floor more so. The ceiling spun just a little before Jazz leaned over Rumble, scooping him up into his arms. "Alright there, Blue? I can show you less painful ways of stopping than smashing into a cranky copter."*

*"You scratched my paint, you little pest. What the frag?" Suddenly the staircase was filled with menacing Combaticons, Vortex closing in on Jazz and Rumble. Jazz quickly backed up to the wall.*

*"Easy, gentlemechs. It was an accident. I assure you Rumble had no evil intent toward your finish... such as it is."*

*Vortex's glare shifted from Rumble up to Jazz, darkening by a few degrees. "I'll tell you when I want you to open your mouth, slave. Better yet, come upstairs and I'll show you. I could do with the quickie."*

*He lifted a suggestive clawtip to Jazz's arm, and Rumble shoved it away. "Hands off the goods, rotors! This one's ours. Go get your own - if you can."*

*Vortex's engines snarled and he snatched Rumble by the neck, yanking him out of Jazz's grasp and dangling him high over the floor. "Big talk from a little con. Let's see if you can still talk after I start squeezing."*

*"Ah, I'd be a little more careful there, Vortex," Jazz warned, his tone light and casual. "Think about who you're gonna make angry if you hurt that little con. I haven't exactly seen it myself, but I've heard Soundwave can hit pretty hard when you give him enough reason."*

*"Tex." Brawl still looked a little wobbly on the joints, and his optics were pale. He shook his head, pleadingly, and Vortex grunted in disgust. Rumble dropped to the stairs in a heap when Vortex opened his hand.*

*"Smart move," Rumble spat, arms swiveling into piledrivers. "Make it two, and get going."*

*Vortex did not deign to look at Rumble, visor carefully tracking Jazz. "So you're Soundwave's property now, huh? What happened? Skywarp get bored with ya?"*

*"Maybe he sold him," Swindle proposed, a gleam of interest in his optics. "Is Megatron allowing slave resale? Now that's a business I could get into. How much did you go for, slave?"*

*"More than you can afford, I'm sure. Megatron still dishing out the bare minimum in fuel for your trips? It's almost like he wants you to starve to death in space. I'm sure that's just my imagination, though."*

*All the Combaticons scowled in unison. "You don't know anything, slave."*

*"Oh, you'd be surprised what I know. Those Seekers, they do love to talk." Jazz started moving up the steps, giving himself a little height over the hulking Combaticons, idle finger trailing along the rail. "Speaking of gossip, did you hear that the Constructicons got a fifth slave for their team?"*

*Shockwave just said they needed him, and Megatron handed him over. And now it's lookin' like the Stunticons might get a slave of their own, in addition to enjoying all the Earth slaves whenever they like. That must be frustrating, knowing you fought just as hard in the war and risked your lives just as often... but you got nothing."*

*"Shut up," growled Brawl. "Just - shut up, slave. It's not your business."*

*"And it's gonna change," Swindle added, a little defiantly. "Tomorrow we'll be on our way to go pick up your pretty-boy friend and when we do, he'll be ours. I got plans for him, too. How much you think a neutral would be willing to pay to frag a slave for a night?"*

*Jazz's easy smile did not even flicker. "Sorry to burst the bubble, boys, but you're not going to catch Mirage. When Mirage doesn't want to be found, he doesn't get found. Autobot brass learned that*



*lesson a long time ago."*

*"So he ditched you and your friends and ran off to save himself. Don't you hate him, slave?"*

*Jazz shrugged. "Can't say I'd do any different if I was in his place. Unlike Decepticons, we bots just want the best for our own. And right now, we're all betting that Mirage is going to leave you in his finely powdered dust. He'll keep you running circles in space until you keel over from exhaustion or starvation, whichever comes first. I wonder if Megatron will even notice you're gone?"*

*Vortex looked like he might lunge at Jazz right then, but Rumble quickly darted in front of Jazz, bristling with the reminder of Soundwave's ownership.*

*"It's almost enough to make me feel sorry for you boys. Because it's obvious enough to anyone with vision that Megatron is really screwing you over. It's not like it was your fault, what happened to Onslaught." Languidly Jazz stretched, popping a neck strut in a show of perfect indifference. "Too bad you can't use Hound to find Mirage. He was always the only bot that could ever track him down. He never failed; it was uncanny, really. Oh, but look at us taking up all your time. We're very sorry, sirs." Again Jazz scooped up Rumble and backed up the wall to give room. "Please don't let us keep you from your rest."*

*The Combaticons looked a little thrown but Blast Off, who up until now had not spoken a word, pushed at Brawl from behind. "C'mon guys, stop wasting time with the bot. I'm dead on my feet and we've only got one cycle to sleep. Get moving."*

*Brawl stumbled up a step and consequently pushed at Swindle, who nudged Vortex. Vortex snarled at Jazz one more time, just to make himself feel better, but he was tired too and obediently started climbing. The rest of the team followed, passing by Jazz and Rumble without comment, but Swindle did glance over his shoulder with a thoughtful look at Jazz.*

*"Yeah, you better run!" Rumble crowed, and Jazz shushed him.*

*"Leave the poor Combaticons alone, Rumble, they have enough to think about. Now then, where were we?"*

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In the space of a second, Soundwave's world shrank to just him, Jazz, and the twenty steps between them. Paintjobs faded to blurs, conversations became simple noise. He barely noticed Rumble ejecting himself out of his chest. The distance between them was vanishing before Soundwave had even realized he was moving forward, one pede in front of the other, a little faster now, must get there faster. Get to Jazz, get him out of Decepticon Headquarters, and do it *now*. Every nanoklik that it took to get there was a nanoklik too many.

Jazz looked up again just in time to see him coming, and shot him a dazzlingly cheerful smile. "Morning, my lov- hey!"

Soundwave didn't even pause. He just closed a steel grip around Jazz's wrist and kept going, yanking Jazz away without warning. The other Autobot squeaked, a sound that blended into the rustle of surprise around them, and Soundwave saw a few surprised glances in their direction.

“Ouch, Soundwave, why so tight? What’s the rush, where are we going? I just got here.” Jazz was almost running to keep up with Soundwave’s long strides, trying without success to pry Soundwave’s grasp off his wrist. Soundwave tightened his grip by a few ruthless degrees and ignored Jazz’s hiss of pain.

“Jazz will be silent.”

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it? What happened in there, why are you so angr-“

“Jazz, *silence*. When asked, you will speak.”

The light in Jazz’s visor paled with nervousness. He looked confused, and scared, and so after one hard glare Soundwave did not look at his face again. His steps devoured the length of the entrance hall, and once outside he swept Jazz briskly into his arms before takeoff. He was clutching Jazz to his chest so tightly that it must have hurt, but Jazz didn’t make any more sounds. Silent as ordered, he held onto Soundwave’s armor, and through it Soundwave was sure he could feel his sparkpulse accelerating. Out of fear? Or guilt?

Jazz scrambled free of Soundwave’s arms the second he’d touched down on his balcony, backing away fast enough to put half the loft between them before his thrusters had even switched off.

“Okay, now you’re really scaring me, Soundwave. What happened, why are you so mad?”

“Pretended innocence, unnecessary. Your conversation, recorded.”

"*What* conversation? Please, tell me what's going on!"

"Slave," Soundwave snapped, and Jazz visibly flinched. Never, not even on their first night together, had Soundwave ever called him by that. Standing at his full height, massive, intimidating, dark with menace, he advanced on Jazz and Jazz backed into the wall. "This, no game.

Consequences too severe. Your actions known but not understood. Confess purpose. Convinced Combaticons to steal Hound, why?"

Surprise flared over the fear in Jazz's face. "The Combaticons stole Hound? What -"

"Questions, mine to ask. Not yours." Hands slapped against the wall on his either side, trapping Jazz. "Confess purpose. Hound's freedom? Why Hound? Your plan, tell *now*."

"Soundwave, please." Jazz's voice was so small. "There's no purpose, no plan. This wasn't supposed to happen. I know I teased the Combaticons that day; I'm Jazz - it's what I do. But it didn't mean anything, I never thought they'd take me seriously. They're a gang of psychopaths, Primus knows what they'll do to him. Oh, Hound -"

"Jazz, lying!" Sharply Soundwave turned Jazz's face back to him when his gaze strayed.

"Conversation, recorded, witnessed. Your satisfaction, too great. Your smile, too pleased. Jazz, object of close study in this home; your behaviors well known. This also known: Jazz hiding something."

"If you're so sure of your answers then why ask the questions?" Out of either anger or fear Jazz shoved at Soundwave’s chest, pushing him back a step. “Fuck you, Soundwave, I didn’t do anything. If those sick freaks took my friend then it’s the empire’s fault – *your* fault, not mine.”

Soundwave hesitated, but for less than a sparkbeat. Jazz, skilled pretender, he reminded himself. He was lying. He *had* to be lying.

Jazz was trying to get away again. Soundwave grabbed his chains and hauled Jazz right off his

pedes, dragging him into his berth chamber. Jazz fought him like he'd never done before, kicking and thrashing, but Soundwave moved too fast for him to regain his balance. He yelped with pain when Soundwave pinned him hard to the berth.

“Answers will be found. If not with your cooperation, then without.”

No one here to guard him, and no chains could hold Jazz. The only thing that could was Soundwave's own heavy body weight, and remorselessly he shifted himself to lie completely atop Jazz. Jazz squirmed underneath, vents gasping.

“You don't want to do this, Soundwave. I promise you do not want to take this step.”

“Begging ineffective. Struggling, not advised.” His external receptors began switching off, preparing his mind for the exploration.

Jazz was trembling underneath him. “No,” he whispered. “I didn't mean... wait, don't -”

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## on your mind

BROKEN BONES BROKEN HEARTS, STRIPPED DOWN AND TORN APART. A LITTLE BIT OF RUST, I'M STILL RUNNIN'.

Sheer volume almost buckled Soundwave and he reflexively moved to dial back his audios, but his audios were gone. His body was gone. Desert night swept around him, stars burning against the black, a highway unwinding through the craggy landscape. Jazz raced along it, joyfully devouring the miles. COUNTIN' MILES COUNTIN' TEARS, TWISTED ROADS SHIFTIN' GEARS. YEAR AFTER YEAR, IT'S ALL OR NOTHIN!

Wrong file, wrong memory. Soundwave had no interest in Jazz playing on Earth. Surprised, he scrambled to exit out, if only to escape that mind-crushing music. Without taking the time to run a search he dove into the first file with a post-war date that he could find, and the familiar skyline of Iacon spread before him. Jazz was following Skywarp, taking his first steps into the city wearing his chains. ALL THE LEAVES ARE BROWN, AND THE SKY IS GRAY! I'VE BEEN FOR A WALK ON A WINTER'S DAY!

Something was not right. Soundwave couldn't hear any thoughts and he should have been able to, no matter how loudly Jazz played his ridiculous music. I'D BE SAFE AND WARM IF I WAS IN L.A. And Jazz didn't play his music after the war... CALIFORNIA DREAMING ON SUCH A WINTER'S DAY!

In frustration Soundwave flipped to the next file, Jazz slumped by the window with Fireflight's head in his lap while Thundercracker and Skywarp recharged on the berth. I LOOK INSIDE MYSELF AND SEE MY HEART IS BLACK, I SEE MY RED DOOR AND IT HAS BEEN PAINTED BLACK. MAYBE THEN I'LL FADE AWAY AND NOT HAVE TO FACE THE FACTS. IT'S NOT EASY FACING UP WHEN YOUR WHOLE WORLD IS BLACK!

A terrible suspicion uncurled within Soundwave. *No*, he told Jazz. *That is not possible.*

Jazz looked up at him, and smiled. HEAD GAMES! IT'S YOU AND ME, BABY, HEAD GAMES!

They sat opposite one another, hax game between them, and Soundwave did not remember moving between files. DAYLIGHT TURNS INTO NIGHT. WE TRY AND FIND THE ANSWER BUT IT'S NOWHERE IN SIGHT. IT'S ALWAYS THE SAME, AND YOU KNOW WHO TO BLAME. YOU KNOW WHAT I'M SAYIN' BUT WE KEEP ON PLAYIN' HEAD GAMES!

*Jazz thinks in music.* Realization sank into Soundwave along with a heavy dose of dread. This- this was unexpected, not a part of his plans. But surely there was not enough human music to apply to every one of Jazz's thoughts, that could not be possible. And there was nothing he could do to hide the images in his memory files. *You cannot hide*, Soundwave said across the game. *I will still find your secrets.*

IT'S SO CLEAR, I'M SORRY TO SAY. BUT IF YOU WANNA WIN YOU GOTTA LEARN HOW TO PLAY HEAD GAMES!

Soundwave broke free of Jazz's grasp and dove back into his memory files, angry, determined. A query run for the word *Combaticon* proved useless; Jazz's keywords were song lyrics.

HOW MANY YEARS CAN A MOUNTAIN EXIST BEFORE IT'S WASHED TO THE SEA? AND HOW MANY YEARS MUST SOME PEOPLE EXIST BEFORE THEY'RE ALLOWED TO BE FREE? THE ANSWER, MY FRIEND, IS BLOWING IN THE WIND. THE ANSWER IS BLOWING IN THE WIND. Iacon again, the Command Trine basking in the adulation of the crowds. Perceptor was pushed aside and tripped; Jazz helped him up. Starscream barked something about not embarrassing him, and slapped his slave hard across the face.

YOU HAVE TO SHOW THEM THAT YOU'RE REALLY NOT SCARED. YOU'RE PLAYING WITH YOUR LIFE THIS AIN'T NO TRUTH OR DARE. THEY'LL KICK YOU THEN THEY BEAT YOU, THEN THEY'LL TELL YOU IT'S FAIR SO BEAT IT. BUT YOU WANNA BE BAD! Jazz shot off one of his usual smart remarks to Starscream and got a slap to his own face, but Perceptor was able to back out of harm's range, forgotten. Jazz wiped a trace of fluid from inside his lip plating and smiled. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHO'S WRONG OR RIGHT, JUST BEAT IT.

Useless. The files backed up on top of one another, waiting to be scanned, each one as incomprehensible as the next. THE FACES ALL AROUND ME THEY DON'T SMILE THEY JUST CRACK. WAITING FOR OUR SHIP TO COME BUT OUR SHIP'S NOT COMING BACK. How could Jazz function with this noise in his own head? Impatiently Soundwave pushed away from the image of Groove scurrying after his masters through the marketplace, it wasn't important. SO GIVE ME SOMETHING TO BELIEVE, CAUSE I AM LIVING JUST TO BREATHE!

A tiny sliver of despair threaded through Soundwave and he hastily retreated, buttoning up his own consciousness against emotional backlash. Going into another's head always bore the risk of getting too involved with the victim's feelings, but Soundwave usually moved in and out too fast for it to be a problem. He must be careful.

CRAWLING DOWN THE ALLEY ON YOUR HANDS AND YOUR KNEES, I'M SURE YOU'RE NOT PROTECTED FOR IT'S PLAIN TO SEE DIAMOND DOGS ARE POACHERS AND THEY HIDE BEHIND TREES. Just another image of the Seekers and their slaves.

Soundwave was about to shove it away but froze at the glimpse of Jazz, moving with a sultry grace Soundwave had never before seen. He slipped between Starscream and Perceptor, all curves and appeal, and then again between Thundercracker and Fireflight. WILL THEY COME? I KEEP A FRIEND SERENE. Starscream and Thundercracker forgot their own slaves, mesmerized by Jazz rolling onto the berth. Skywarp was only too happy to share. Hungry and eager, all three fell upon Jazz in the berth. WILL THEY COME? OH BABY, COME UNTO ME. He didn't fight them in the slightest.

*This memory, unnecessary,* he snapped. *Irrelevant.* Abruptly he moved on. The next file showed Jazz alone, relief enough, and it was a sight as familiar to Soundwave as Jazz himself. Alone in the darkness he danced, still in his chains, but silent as a spark floating through the night. Graceful as ever, there was a sadness to his motions now. A light that was no star blazed overhead. O COME O COME EMANUEL, AND FREE YOUR CAPTIVE ISRAEL THAT DWELLS IN LONELY EXILE HERE, UNTIL THE SON OF GOD APPEARS. He was dancing under the Matrix. REJOICE, REJOICE! EMANUEL SHALL COME TO THEE, O ISRAEL.

This was no memory, this was imagination. Taken aback, Soundwave quickly exited the file. It was not like him to make such a mistake, but the music distracted him, made navigation difficult. More of it was playing, this time without any kind of words at all. Just those human-made instruments, playing at blessedly soft volume while Jazz lay on the floor and watched Starscream. Studied him, rather. It was a little unnerving how intently Jazz's gaze followed Starscream, and all the while Soundwave could hear no thoughts but the increasing surges of violin music. To Soundwave it meant nothing. What did it mean to Jazz?

TO EVERYTHING, TURN TURN TURN. THERE IS A SEASON, TURN TURN TURN. AND A TIME TO EVERY PURPOSE UNDER HEAVEN. New file, new memory. Jazz chatted cheerfully with Groove and Fireflight, making silly nonsense jokes and provoking the occasional wan smile. A TIME TO BUILD UP, A TIME TO BREAK DOWN. A TIME TO DANCE, A TIME TO MOURN. A TIME TO CAST AWAY STONES, A TIME TO GATHER STONES TOGETHER.

Human music and its ludicrous words! Soundwave was getting more than a little exasperated with it, which was doing nothing for his concentration. At least Cybertronian only ever meant exactly what it was supposed to mean. Precise and logical, it could never be manipulated the way those silly humans manipulated their own languages into senseless phrases. Of course Jazz would choose only Earth music to organize his mind. For how long? Since he woke up on that planet? Somehow, Jazz had managed to find a way to think in the only language Soundwave could not understand.

I WANT TO HOLD HIM LIKE THEY DO IN TEXAS PLEASE. FOLD EM LET EM HIT ME RAISE IT BABY STAY WITH ME. Suddenly it was the beginning again: the nightspot, the Seekers, cards and credit chips and a watching slave down there on the floor. His stare didn't leave Soundwave for a second. CAN'T READ MY- CAN'T READ MY- NO HE CAN'T READ MY POKER FACE.

Stand, he'd said, victorious and claiming his prize. Jazz had obeyed so quietly, but in his head the music was raging. WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME? IT'S NOT HOW IT USED TO BE. YOU'VE TAKEN MY LIFE AWAY, RUINING EVERYTHING!

*No,* Soundwave denied without thinking. *That song, not true.* That only attracted Jazz's attention again. Consciousness crossed with memory and Jazz's lips curved into a cold smile. IN SLEEP HE SANG TO ME, IN DREAMS HE CAME. THAT VOICE WHICH CALLS TO ME, AND SPEAKS MY NAME. AND DO I DREAM AGAIN? FOR NOW I FIND THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA IS HERE INSIDE MY MIND.

Jazz dared to interact with him in his own mind. Usually his victims did everything they could to hide, but Jazz perched there on the edge of Soundwave's berth, posing for him, gliding one pede seductively down the length of his leg. He was mocking him.

*Go, Soundwave ordered him. My work here, incomplete. Distractions, useless.*

JOHNNY, ANGRY JOHNNY, THIS IS JEZEBEL IN HELL. I WANNA KILL YOU. I WANNA BLOW YOU AWAY. Angrily Soundwave pushed on to another file, caught by surprise when Ravage sprang out of the shadows to attack. Jazz hit the ground and rolled, barely keeping himself unsliced, and Soundwave proceeded to discipline Ravage in short order. BOW DOWN BEFORE THE ONE YOU SERVE, YOU'RE GOING TO GET WHAT YOU DESERVE. Jazz scuttled back against the wall to watch, fists clenching tight around his chains as Soundwave demonstrated mastery over his household. HEAD LIKE A HOLE, BLACK AS YOUR SOUL, I'D RATHER DIE THAN GIVE YOU CONTROL!

Back in his loft, Soundwave held his expectant hand out to Jazz, waiting for him to make his choice. Berth, or couch? DON'T CALL MY NAME, DON'T CALL MY NAME, ALEJANDRO. I'M NOT YOUR BABE, I'M NOT YOUR BABE, FERNANDO! What? Who? Jazz let himself be pulled into Soundwave's lap, cringing at the humiliation, struggling to curl out of the reach of Soundwave's mouth. DON'T WANNA KISS, DON'T WANNA TOUCH, JUST SMOKE MY CIGARETTE AND HUSH, DON'T CALL MY NAME, DON'T CALL MY NAME, ROBERTO!

STOP, PLEASE. JUST LET ME GO, ALEJANDRO. JUST LET ME GO.

Soundwave quickly backed out of the memory but the next one was more pleasant. In the marketplace, Jazz watched Laserbeak alight on Soundwave's shoulder, looking for a little affection, and how Soundwave pet her wings before she took off again. It was one of those times Soundwave had caught Jazz looking at him with such a thoughtful expression. I'M LOOKING AT YOU THROUGH THE GLASS, DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH TIME HAS PASSED. ALL I KNOW IS THAT IT FEELS LIKE FOREVER, BUT NO ONE EVER TELLS YOU THAT FOREVER FEELS LIKE HOME, SITTING ALL ALONE INSIDE YOUR HEAD.

Soundwave poured tiny crystals of energon into Jazz's palm, guiding him to feed Laserbeak that one morning. She pecked and nibbled at her breakfast, trusting Jazz to hold it steady, and Jazz relaxed – even smiled. HOW MUCH IS REAL? THAT IS THE QUESTION. BUT I FORGET YOU DON'T EXPECT AN EASY ANSWER. WHEN SOMETHING LIKE A SOUL BECOMES INITIALIZED AND FOLDED UP LIKE PAPER DOLLS AND LITTLE NOTES, YOU CAN'T EXPECT A BIT OF HOPE. SO WHILE YOU'RE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN, DESCRIBING WHAT YOU SEE, REMEMBER WHAT YOU'RE STARING AT IS ME.

Starscream retreated, optics glazed, stunned speechless by Jazz's verbal attack that day of the rain. Soundwave remembered how triumphant his grin had been afterwards, but the music coursing through his head did not sound triumphant. I GOT A DISEASE DEEP INSIDE ME, MAKES ME FEEL UNEASY, BABY. I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT YOU, TELL ME WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO ABOUT IT?

Himself and Jazz in the shower, arguing about hugging First Aid that morning. REACHING OUT FOR SOMETHING TO HOLD, LOOKING FOR A LOVE WHERE THE CLIMATE IS COLD. Jazz slipped his hand into Soundwave's and squeezed it, triggering indescribable thrills through Soundwave's spark. SMOKING GUNS, HOT TO THE TOUCH, WOULD COOL DOWN IF WE DIDN'T USE THEM SO MUCH. YOU'RE OUT OF TOUCH, I'M OUT OF TIME! BUT I'M OUT OF MY HEAD WHEN YOU'RE NOT AROUND.

Back in the market, Jazz lifted his chin, asking him to smile without success. Impatiently he scampered up onto the wall, always the showoff. REMEMBER HOW I FOUND YOU THERE, ALONE IN YOUR ELECTRIC CHAIR? I TOLD YOU DIRTY JOKES UNTIL YOU SMILED. YOU WERE LONELY FOR A MAN, I SAID TAKE ME AS I AM, CAUSE YOU MIGHT ENJOY SOME MADNESS FOR A WHILE. In the middle of his loft he watched pieces of glitchmouse fly back and forth between Jazz and the twins, their giddy laughter and overwhelming happiness bursting inside his spark. I WAS ONLY HAVING FUN, WASN'T HURTING ANYONE. AND WE ALL ENJOYED THE WEEKEND FOR A CHANGE. YOU MAY BE RIGHT! I MAY BE CRAZY, BUT IT JUST MAY BE A LUNATIC YOU'RE LOOKING FOR.

Night of the mid-vorn. Anxious hope jumped up inside Soundwave when he saw Jazz there on the roof, wishing he could understand this music and knowing that he never would. WHAT'LL YOU DO WHEN YOU GET LONELY? AND NOBODY'S WAITIN' BY YOUR SIDE. YOU'VE BEEN RUNNING AND HIDING MUCH TOO LONG, YOU KNOW IT'S JUST YOUR FOOLISH PRIDE. Again Soundwave experienced the warm pleasure of Jazz's body underneath his, the exposure of his neck, the taste of his metal. YOU'VE GOT ME ON MY KNEES, LAYLA. BEGGIN' DARLIN' PLEASE, LAYLA. DARLIN' WON'T YOU EASE MY WORRIED MIND.

Soundwave wanted to hit something in his frustration, not a possibility without his own fists. *What does it mean?* he asked an uncaring Jazz. *What does it mean?*

WELCOME TO THE HOTEL CALIFORNIA. SUCH A LOVELY PLACE, SUCH A LOVELY FACE. PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE HOTEL CALIFORNIA, ANY TIME OF YEAR YOU CAN FIND IT HERE. Memory files glided past him, triggered by this new music, short but sparkstopping moments when Jazz touched him, let himself be tickled by him, held his hand as they fled the command room together. In the dim glow of Soundwave's berth chamber, he covered his own Decepticon sigil for Jazz's sake. Jazz had touched him not-quite-unwillingly that night, hands gliding under his armor to massage the hidden sensor wires beneath. MIRRORS ON THE CEILING, PINK CHAMPAGNE ON ICE AND SHE SAID, WE ARE ALL JUST PRISONERS HERE OF OUR OWN DEVICE. And then, strangely enough, Soundwave witnessed Jazz keep watch over his own sleeping body in the office, ignoring the computers with all their tempting intel, only watching Soundwave in his fitful recharge. What was going through his mind? This, apparently. LAST THING I REMEMBER I WAS RUNNING FOR THE DOOR. I HAD TO FIND THE PASSAGE BACK TO THE PLACE I WAS BEFORE. RELAX, SAID THE NIGHTMAN, WE ARE PROGRAMMED TO RECEIVE. YOU CAN CHECK OUT ANY TIME YOU LIKE, BUT YOU CAN NEVER LEAVE.

With a start, Soundwave realized how he'd let himself get distracted. Jazz was too smart, dangling



these memories of their own intimacy to lure Soundwave away from his original objective. Quickly he exited out of the file, again taking control of the search. Jazz retaliated by jacking up the volume several decibels.

NEVER CAPTURED, NEVER TAMED, WILD HORSES ON THE PLAINS. YOU COULD CALL ME LOST, I CALL IT FREEDOM. I FEEL THE SPIRIT IN MY SOUL. IT'S SOMETHING, LORD, I CAN'T CONTROL. I'M NEVER GIVIN' UP WHILE I'M STILL BREATHIN! Back in the desert again, Jazz tearing down the highway. Why did this memory keep popping back up? Irritably Soundwave shoved himself clear, moving back to post-war files.

A LA VOLONTÉ DU PEUPLE, ET Á LA SANTE DU PROGRÈS. REMPLIS TON COEUR D'UN VIN REBELLE, ET Á DEMAIN AMI FIDÈLE! Heart full of rebellious wine didn't make any kind of sense, but it did sound vaguely treacherous. Yet all Jazz was doing was following Skywarp, past the wall that encircled Decepticon Headquarters. Uncertainly he watched the remainder of the memory, to see if anything happened. NOUS VOULONS FAIRE LA LUMIÈRE MALGRÉ LE MASQUE DE LA NUIT. POUR ILLUMINER NOTRE TERRE ET CHANGER LA VIE!

Nothing. Inside Headquarters, Jazz was left with his fellow Autobots and promptly tackled by the desperate slaves. ON BOARD I'M THE CAPTAIN, SO CLIMB ABOARD. WE'LL SEARCH FOR TOMORROW ON EVERY SHORE. AND I'LL TRY, OH LORD I'LL TRY, TO CARRY ON! COME SAIL AWAY, COME SAIL AWAY WITH M-

Megatron stalked past, barking for his slave to follow, and Bluestreak was too slow to untangle himself from Jazz. Impatiently Megatron backhanded him hard enough in the face to knock him to the floor. He didn't even look at him, optics tracking Jazz to watch his reaction, lips curling into a cruel smirk. Outside, Jazz didn't even twitch. In his mind, an explosion of sound almost obliterated Soundwave's consciousness, and the files veered out of Soundwave's control. OH AND AS I WATCHED HIM ON THE STAGE, MY HANDS WERE CLENCHED IN FISTS OF RAGE. NO ANGEL BORN IN HELL COULD BREAK THAT SATAN'S SPELL. Jazz's memories twisted, spiraling down into a file dark with pain. Against the harsh glare of explosions and laser fire, Soundwave watched Megatron take aim, smiling as he fired upon the fuel spill in which Optimus Prime was trapped. The Autobot leader and his mate disappeared in a ball of gold flame, and Jazz's rage and grief skewered the unprepared Soundwave. AND AS THE FLAMES CLIMBED HIGH INTO THE NIGHT, TO LIGHT THE SACRIFICIAL RITE, I SAW SATAN LAUGHING WITH DELIGHT THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED!

Had he been in his own body, Soundwave would have collapsed under the sheer torrent of pain. All his concentration switched to frantic self-defense, trying to shove back Jazz's emotions before they could overwhelm his own consciousness. For a sparkbeat he felt Jazz's rage as if it were his own, tasted his hatred for Megatron and reveled in it, experienced the urge to murder Megatron with his own hands. Then he was in control of himself again, securely Soundwave and only Soundwave. Ragged with fatigue, he could only watch as Jazz's memories flowed past. BORN TO PUSH YOU AROUND, YOU BETTER JUST STAY DOWN. YOU PUT AWAY, HE HITS THE FLESH, YOU HIT THE GROUND. MAPS SO FULL OF LIES TEND TO BLACK YOUR EYES. JUST KEEP THEM CLOSE, KEEP PRAYING, JUST KEEP WAITING.

At first Soundwave could not understand where Jazz was. He was lying on the floor like Soundwave had forbid him to do, and there was no sign of himself or Skywarp. Someone's screams rang in Jazz's audios. Only when Jazz rolled over onto his back did Soundwave realize he was underneath someone's berth, chained to one leg of it, and he only had to hear a few distinctive grunts of pleasure to know whose berth it was. For sixteen orns, the records said, Megatron had kept Jazz before granting him to Skywarp. Nobody had ever known what happened during those sixteen orns. WAITING FOR THE ONE, THE DAY THAT NEVER COMES. WHEN YOU STAND UP AND FEEL THE WARMTH, BUT THE SUNSHINE NEVER COMES. NO THE SUNSHINE NEVER COMES.

The screams changed every night, signaling another Autobot underneath Megatron. Jazz never said a word, didn't try to fight, did nothing to put himself between Megatron and the other slaves; he must have known Megatron wouldn't tolerate it. He simply lay there on the floor, watching the berth bounce overhead, and all the while the same song played in his mind. PUSH YOU CROSS THAT LINE, JUST STAY DOWN THIS TIME. HIDING YOURSELF, CRAWL IN YOURSELF. GOD, I'LL MAKE THEM PAY, TAKE IT BACK ONE DAY. I'LL END THIS DAY, I'LL SPREAD THE COLOR ON THIS GRAVE!

Only when it was Jazz's turn did the music change. Megatron pushed him down onto the berth, shoving his huge hands under Jazz's armor, forcing his way in, laughing when Jazz screamed. But even as Jazz's back arched and he writhed with pain, the song never faltered. WHILE YOU WERE LOOKING THE OTHER WAY, WHILE YOU HAD YOUR EYES CLOSED, WHILE YOU WERE LICKING YOUR LIPS 'CAUSE I WAS MISERABLE. WHILE YOU WERE SELLING YOUR SOUL, WHILE YOU WERE TEARING A HOLE IN ME, I WAS TAKING CONTROL. Jazz surprised them both by crawling back onto Megatron when it was over, glossa tracing the long seams of his armor, hands gliding over his neck in a way that could have been seductive or just a thought to strangle him. Megatron made some remark that he was pleased to have broken Jazz in so quickly, and Jazz's only answer was to smile. SURPRISED YOU TO FIND THAT I'M LAUGHING? YOU THOUGHT THAT YOU'D FIND ME IN TEARS. YOU THOUGHT I'D BE CRAWLING THE WALLS LIKE A TINY MOSQUITO AND TREMBLING IN FEAR. WELL YOU MAY BE KING FOR THE MOMENT, BUT I AM A QUEEN, UNDERSTAND? AND I'VE GOT YOUR PAWNS AND YOUR BISHOPS AND CASTLES ALL INSIDE THE PALM OF MY HAND.

Soundwave didn't like that smile at all, and he didn't like what was playing in Jazz's mind. *What are you planning?* he asked, tired of trying to sift through senseless song lyrics. *What do you think you can do?*

A SUMMER DISREGARD, A BROKEN BOTTLE TOP, AND A ONE MAN SOUL. THEY FOLLOW EACH OTHER ON THE WIND YA' KNOW, 'CAUSE THEY GOT NOWHERE TO GO. THAT'S WHY I WANT YOU TO KNOW I'M STARTING WITH THE MAN IN THE MIRROR!

Jazz and Megatron again, but this time the real thing had been replaced by one of his statues. In the shadow of Megatron's colossal monument Jazz danced, motions sharp and skillful. I'M ASKING HIM TO CHANGE HIS WAYS. AND NO MESSAGE COULD HAVE BEEN ANY CLEARER, IF YOU WANNA MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, TAKE A LOOK AT YOURSELF AND THEN MAKE A CHANGE!

More music without words, Jazz's gaze tracking Shockwave in the command room at Headquarters. The patterns were superficially different, but Soundwave recognized the underlying mathematical beat, and surmised the two pieces were connected somehow. For some reason, that made Soundwave doubly uneasy. He would have given much to understand their meaning.

E VOLERO! Jazz lifted his arm as Laserbeak launched herself into the air, his pure longing surging up within Soundwave and necessitating another hasty barrier. Jazz danced beneath her swooping aerial stunts, aching for the freedom her flight. VERSO ALTRI ORRIZONTI! OLTRE L'OMBRA DI MONTI CHE MAI NESSUNO SALIRA! PASANO LE NUVOLE, L'INVERNO PRESTO FINIRA. SOFFIERO VIA LA POLVERE E IL CUORE MIO SI SVEGLIERA!

Winter almost over? Winter didn't even exist on Cybertron. Soundwave was becoming acutely conscious of the exhaustion creeping through him, and knew he was pushing the limits of his own endurance. How long had he been in here? A breem? Two? Mental exploration was not meant to carry on this long and the strain on his own mind and body were considerable. But if he was tired then Jazz was too, and Soundwave still had not found the one memory he'd come seeking. Wearily he struggled to regain his control over the search.

GO DOWN MOSES, WAY DOWN IN EGYPT'S LAND. TELL OLD PHARAOH LET MY PEOPLE GO! Soundwave experienced a mild flush of triumph when he recognized one of Earth's old nations, but this didn't seem to have anything to do with Earth. Jazz was just watching Grapple and Hoist erect some scaffolding under Scrapper's supervision. NO MORE SHALL THEY IN BONDAGE TOIL. LET MY PEOPLE GO! LET THEM COME OUT WITH EGYPT'S SPOIL - LET MY PEOPLE GO!

Annoyed, Soundwave summoned the strength to tear through several files quickly, not bothering to break his mind against the nonsense of Jazz's unending musical. WE WEREN'T BORN TO FOLLOW, COME ON AND GET UP OFF YOUR KNEES! LIFE IS A BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW- CARRY ON, MY WAYWARD SON, THERE'LL BE PEACE WHEN YOU ARE D- GONNA BE YOUR MAN IN MOTION, ALL I NEED'S A PAIR OF WHEELS, TAKE ME WHERE MY FUTURE'S LYIN', ST. ELMO'S FIRE- ITT AZ IDŐ, MOST VAGY SOHA! RABOK LEGYÜNK VAGY SZABADOK? A MAGYAROK INSTENÉRE, ESKÜSZÜNK, ESKÜSZÜNK HOGY RABOK TOVÁBB NEM LESZÜNK!

More by luck than anything else, Soundwave stumbled right into Jazz's memory of teasing the Combaticons that day on the stairs. But this was no more helpful than anything else; the only music playing in Jazz's mind was a little human girl singing about how the sun would come up tomorrow, which to any Earth-dweller ought to be obvious enough a fact. Helplessly he watched the scene play out, already knowing every word spoken, every nuance of Jazz's satisfied grin. He'd meant to do it, Soundwave was still sure of that, but he would find nothing here to tell him why.

*Jazz, Soundwave tried, and the reality around him wobbled slightly. He was tired too. Confess plan. Your own fatigue, evident, continued resistance unwise. Surrender, explain purpose.*

The light around him dimmed, casting a soft glow on a room that was surely Jazz's imagination. The

furniture was wooden; human designed. Several of those music-making instruments were clustered on the stage, across which Jazz rolled on a wheeled stool. LIKE JACK HORNER IN THE CORNER, DON'T GO NOWHERE. WHAT DO I CARE? AIN'T MISBEHAVIN', SAVIN' MY LOVE FOR YOU.

Soundwave had heard this music before. Languid and supple as Ravage, Jazz arched his back and rolled off onto the stage floor. Singing along with his favorite song, he crawled hands and knees across the distance between them. I DON'T STAY OUT LATE, DON'T CARE TO GO. I'M HOME ABOUT EIGHT, JUST ME AND MY RADIO. Resigned, Soundwave stood quite still as Jazz reached for him, hands cupping his face with tender affection. AIN'T MISBEHAVIN', Jazz crooned. SAVIN' MY LOVE FOR YOU.

He tipped closer, as if trying for a kiss, but at the last moment Soundwave backed away. *Stop. Don't.*

The room blurred, and Soundwave felt something like Jazz's hand grasping to hold onto him, but it was too late to see what had happened. They were in Shockwave's creaking factory again, Jazz watching him from the catwalk above. IF I FALL ALONG THE WAY, PICK ME UP AND DUST ME OFF. IF I GET TOO TIRED TO MAKE IT, BE MY BREATH SO I CAN WALK. IF I NEED SOME OF YOUR LOVE AGAIN, GIVE ME MORE THAN I CAN STAND. WHEN MY SMILE GETS OLD AND FADED, WAIT AROUND I'LL SMILE AGAIN. SHOULDN'T BE SO COMPLICATED - JUST HOLD ME AND THEN HOLD ME AGAIN!

CAN YOU HELP ME? I'M BENT. I'M SO SCARED THAT I'LL NEVER GET PUT BACK TOGETHER.

This time it was definitely not Soundwave's imagination that Jazz reached out for him, but the memory crumbled away before he could touch. Not even Jazz was controlling the flow of thoughts anymore, they'd both been pressed to the limits of their strength. The ruins of warzone Cybertron surrounded them, rusting graveyard for the fallen. Five unmarked poles had been jabbed into the ground, a sorry memorial for five dead sparks.

COME HERE, PRETTY PLEASE. CAN YOU TELL ME WHERE I AM? YOU, WON'T YOU SAY SOMETHING? I NEED TO GET MY BEARINGS. I'M LOST, AND THE SHADOWS KEEP ON CHANGING. Soundwave shook his head in pleading denial but Jazz had no more power to change this than he did. Worn and limp with grief, Jazz crumpled to his knees before the markers, paying some kind of respect to his dead friends. AND I'M HAUNTED BY THE LIVES THAT I HAVE LOVED, AND ACTIONS I HAVE HATED. I'M HAUNTED BY THE PROMISES I'VE MADE, AND OTHERS I HAVE BROKEN! I'M HAUNTED BY THE LIVES THAT WOVE THE WEB INSIDE MY HAUNTED HEAD.

*Not this,* Soundwave tried, and the reality around them flickered. *This subject, not welcome.*

DON'T CRY, THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY. HERE IN NOVEMBER IN THIS HOUSE OF LEAVES WE'LL PRAY. PLEASE, I KNOW IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE, TO SEE A PERFECT

FOREST THROUGH SO MANY SPLINTERED TREES. YOU AND ME - AND THESE SHADOWS KEEP ON CHANGING.

Jazz laid a reverent hand on the pole in the center, but at the same time he looked to Soundwave. He seemed... uncertain about something. Clouds that Soundwave hadn't noticed before split open, raining over them all, and Soundwave flinched out of reflex. But what fell from the sky pattered harmlessly against Jazz's armor, like the rain back on Earth. AND WHEN YOUR FEARS SUBSIDE AND SHADOWS STILL REMAIN, I KNOW THAT YOU CAN LOVE ME WHEN THERE'S NO ONE LEFT TO BLAME. SO NEVER MIND THE DARKNESS, WE STILL CAN FIND A WAY. NOTHIN' LASTS FOREVER, EVEN COLD NOVEMBER RAIN.

A cacophony of stringed instruments swelled when Jazz stood, forcing himself to back away from the five markers. Rain fell in torrents, billowing around them, and through it the blue light of Jazz's visor focused on Soundwave alone. MUST THIS BE THE FINAL DANCE IN OUR LIVES AS TIME JUST MOVES ON? YESTERDAY'S YEARS ARE TOO QUICKLY GONE. ALL VISIONS FADE AS WORLDS FALL APART, DECISIONS ARE MADE BUT THERE IN THIS DARK NOW.

Jazz circled him at a deliberately slow pace, never dropping his gaze for a second. DID YOU EVER WALK UP TO THE EDGE OF A CLIFF, STARE INTO THE ABYSS AS YOUR MIND WONDERS IF YOU SHOULD TAKE ONE MORE STEP FURTHER INTO THAT NIGHT? WELL YOUR MIND SAYS YOU WON'T BUT YOUR HEART SAYS YOU MIGHT.

STARE INTO THE DARK AS THE ABYSS KEEPS CALLING, TRY TO TAKE A STEP BUT THEN THE MIND KEEPS STALLING. CAN A SINGLE QUESTION JUST GO ON FOREVER? AS A SINGLE THOUGHT GOES ON, IT'S NOW OR NEVER. BE WHO YOU ARE, WHAT YOU WERE, WHAT THEY SEE. FROM ETERNITY'S VIEW TELL ME WHICH ONE IS ME?

What did it mean? Soundwave would never understand, not if he had a lifetime to try. Cautiously, he tried letting down a little of his guard against Jazz's emotions. Desperate confusion promptly swallowed him, Jazz's pure panic at the unknown tearing him apart from within.

DID YOU EVER WALK UP TO THE EDGE OF A CLIFF, STARE INTO THE ABYSS AS YOUR MIND WONDERS IF YOU SHOULD TAKE ONE MORE STEP FURTHER INTO THAT NIGHT? WELL YOUR MIND SAYS YOU WON'T, BUT THEN THIS ALL IS YOUR LIFE.

Soundwave stumbled back in his hurry to push it all away again, and knew Jazz had felt it. He staggered for balance, and for the first time since Soundwave had come here, the music dwindled into total silence. In the quiet, Jazz looked lost.

*The end?* Soundwave asked, curious - and hopeful - to know if they had exhausted Jazz's musical library at last.

Jazz plucked up a weak grin in response. NEVER NEVER NEVER SAY NEVER! NE DIS JAMAIS JAMAIS! BETTER BETTER BELIEVE IN FOREVER, AND IT CAN BE THAT WAY!

Broken machinery and old metal was swept away by the hot desert wind, the sand and colored cliffs of Earth still clinging to their warmth even under the star-studded sky. This place again. LIKE THE WIND, LIKE THE RAIN, IT'S ALL RUNNIN' THROUGH MY VEINS, LIKE A RIVER POURING DOWN INTO THE OCEAN. I'M OUT HERE, ON THE STREETS, BUT I'M STANDIN' ON MY FEET. STILL ALIVE, STILL ALONE, STILL UNBROKEN!

Jazz faced him unflinchingly, head held high, music getting louder by the second. All around them the Autobot slaves raced across the desert, earth peeling away from under their neglected tires, engines roaring with joy. I'M NOT HOME! I'M NOT LOST! STILL HOLDIN' ON TO WHAT I'VE GOT - AIN'T MUCH LEFT, BUT THERE'S SO MUCH THAT'S BEEN STOLEN!

The exhausted Soundwave, too weak to last more than a few seconds, finally realized what he ought to have known from the start: this image was no memory file. Jazz wanted this moment. Jazz dreamed for this moment. He was waiting for this moment. I GUESS I'VE LOST EVERYTHING I HAD, BUT I'M NOT DEAD, AT LEAST NOT YET. STILL ALIVE, STILL ALONE, STILL UNBROKEN!

Jazz slipped away from him like sand on the wind. Only one step back and he collapsed into his vehicle mode, easily as he could dance. Grit sprayed out from underneath his tires and then Jazz was gone, weaving amongst the other Autobots, leading them in their race under the stars. I'M STILL ALIVE! STILL ALONE! STILL UNBROKEN! I AIN'T NEVER GOIN' DOWN!

STILL UNBROKEN!

The music held on longer than anything else. After the night sky and the grainy blast of sand had gone, and even the roar of Autobot engines vanished, the sheer fury of the music echoed in the dark. When everything else had disintegrated, Jazz's mind unwrapping itself from around Soundwave and floating loose, only then did the music fade to merciful silence. External sensors switched on, cruelly inflicting light onto his unprepared optical relay. Soundwave started, pushing himself clear before he remembered where his body was, and his struts screamed in protest.

Beneath him, Jazz's visor flickered on with a wan blue glow. "Was it good for you too, baby?" he wheezed, and promptly shut down into stasis. Soundwave collapsed beside him, and did the same.

## on trial

He slept. For an entire cycle he slept, so deep in recharge that the world outside might as well not have existed. The noise of the city didn't touch him, and neither did the tentative tappings of his worried casseticons. The stars were in their evening positions when his optic relay flickered on, at one point; starlight and Jazz sleeping soundly beside him were all he saw before his exhausted mind shut down again. Joors passed. When Soundwave's mind groped its way back to consciousness again, his chronometer informed him that it was well into the night cycle and Iacon had shut down again for curfew. Nobody else was home. His hydraulics put down a firm veto on movement, so Soundwave abandoned the thought of sitting up and checked on Jazz again.

A pale blue glow met his gaze; Jazz was awake. Though probably not much more than that, given that he was still lying exactly where he'd passed out that morning. The glow waned, blinked out for a moment, then renewed itself.

"Finally up?" Jazz mumbled.

"Affirmative."

"Too bad." Jazz's head rolled and he looked back up at the ceiling. "I was kinda hoping that you'd died."

"Deactivation, unlikely. Condition: excessive fatigue and sensor pain. Activity, more strenuous than expected."

"I hope it hurts like hell."

"Jazz's exhaustion, also evident."

"Small price to pay." Jazz shifted in the berth, trying to push himself to the edge.

"Movement, not advised."

"Shut up and go back to sleep. I'm just gonna... take advantage of your weakened state and escape now. It's been lovely, Soundwave, but goodbye forever. Don't try to find me." He rolled off the berth, and dropped to the floor with an uncharacteristically clumsy thud and a squawk of pain. Soundwave didn't move. Gazing at the ceiling, he listened to Jazz's low moan, and half-sparked efforts to get up again.

"Suggestion repeated: movement not advised."

"Oh, *now* you care about my wellbeing. Go. To. Hell." Jazz didn't bother trying to stand again.

Soundwave heard - and then saw, once he'd emerged from underneath the berth - him crawling across the floor on his hands and knees. If Soundwave thought there was a remote chance he'd make it twenty paces, he might have bothered getting up. As it was, Jazz surprised him by at least reaching the far wall before slumping against it, vents wheezing. For some while, it was the only noise in the room.

"Query."

"What?"

"How long?" Jazz looked up, meeting Soundwave's gaze again. "Your... archival process, in place for how long?"

A corner of Jazz's mouth twitched into a dark smile. "About a year or so after we woke up on Earth. Ratchet called it 'glitched-stupid,' and impossible besides, but I'm always proving people wrong when they say that. He just didn't know how much human music was out there for the pickings. I've never lacked for the perfect song." He tipped his head back against the wall. "I'm filing today under Pink Floyd's *Brain Damage*. 'You lock the door and throw away the key... there's someone in my head, but it's not me.' Pity you didn't brush up against any of my Pink Floyd files. Those lyrics would have broken you for sure."

Something in his gaze turned taunting, and Soundwave scowled a little. "I wish I could tell Ratchet now how my little project panned out. To think, I'd wind up with the one Decepticon on the planet that can't figure out a simple song. That must have been such a nasty shock for you. *Blaster* would have understood every note of all that. Oh dear, was that insensitive of me? Good thing you deal well with frustration and failure."

Soundwave struggled not to clench his fists, knowing Jazz was watching for it and determined not to give him the satisfaction. "Telepathic exploration, not a failure. Some parts, understood."

"So you think."

"Understood," Soundwave insisted, and in a burst of stubbornness pushed himself to sit upright. Joints complained, but he didn't try to stand and only swayed a little. "This much understood: Jazz hoping for freedom."

"Didn't like that, did you, love? Well I tried to warn you, but you wouldn't listen. I know how much you enjoy pretending that we're madly in love, raising a happy family. Does it hurt, knowing that I'm still dreaming of my freedom while I lie in your berth?"

Soundwave's spark constricted painfully in his chest, but he resolutely ignored the venomous words.

"My feelings, irrelevant right now. Possible treason, relevant. Autobots, now possessions of Decepticon Empire. Consistent declarations of freedom crime against Lord Megatron."



"A crime well worth committing," Jazz said bitterly. "You saw what we've been through. What he did to us. Megatron is so arrogant. He thinks he can lock us in these collars, humiliate us, and rape us, and that's enough to turn us into his personal harem of slaves. But the Autobots are not as weak as he likes to pretend we are. He thinks we're broken, and we're not. At his feet, in his berth, it doesn't matter - we are always thinking about being free."

Soundwave's grip was curling over the edge of the berth while Jazz spoke, his head high and looking right at Soundwave as if he had nothing to hide.

"Thinking?" he asked. "Or plotting?"

"Still mad about that Combaticon thing, are we?"

"Your purpose that day, primary objective of telepathic interrogation."

"The *failed* objective of telepathic interrogation, you mean." Jazz smirked again and managed to stretch his arms over his head, his smile curving into something wicked.

"Shall I tell you a secret, Soundwave? I miss the fear. Not mine, obviously, but the Decepticons'.

They did, quite often, fear me. Your troops feared surprise demolitions in the center of their camp, unfortunate mishaps with their weaponry, nasty viruses threading through their systems, a swift blade across the knee joints in the dark. Do you remember it? Oh, I do. There was a time when entire squadrons of Decepticon soldiers huddled in their camp with blasters pointed at the shadows because *Jazz* was rumored to be in the area and looking for a little fun. I miss it, commanding that kind of fear. Give you Decepticons control of an Empire and it's amazing how quickly you forget. Now nobody thinks about what a threat I used to be. For six years, I've been - how did Skywarp put it? A little pet whore."

His gaze had drifted, but now it focused again on Soundwave, intensely blue. "I've never seen you so angry before, and it's true that you scared me this morning. But it's also true - don't try to deny it - that you were scared too. You were afraid of what I might have done to the Empire, what I was capable of, and I saw it. I could almost taste it. Mmm but that tasted sweet, like a little morsel of what I used to have.

"So you know what? I did it. I'm guilty. I plotted the whole thing, fixed everything so I could be there on the stairs and drop that tantalizing hint right into the Combaticons' laps. Maybe I can't escape, but I can trick a team of rogue Cons into freeing at least one of my friends for me. Course, now he's trapped in deep space with four very unhinged soldiers who may or may not be torturing him into hunting down Mirage, but at least he's out of that prison camp and out of his tracking collar. If he *could* escape, then that's it - Megatron will never find him. Tall order for a guy who worked as a cartographer before the war and lists bird-watching as his favorite hobby, but miracles can happen. I admit it, it's not one of my most foolproof plans, but for sheer daring it wins the prize. I am *Jazz*, and I still got it."

The room went silent again, air flowing softly through Jazz's vents. That superior gleam in his visor

was infuriating. Jazz must be innocent – that 'plan' was nothing less than a foolhardy gamble with the Autobot's life. Or... he must be guilty, deliberately pointing out those flaws to pretend innocence. Was he faking guilt or faking innocence? Game theory said it could be either, and if Jazz was master of anything, it was the game.

“Jazz, lying? Or telling truth?”

“Who knows? Certainly not you.”

“Other methods of interrogation possible,” Soundwave reminded him darkly, but Jazz just shrugged.

“Do it. You only have to suggest to Megatron that I might have had something to do with all this, and he won't stop tearing off limbs until he gets a confession. We both know that much. What you don't know is if there'll be anything left of me when he's done.”

That much, at least, was the truth. Hand Jazz over to Megatron and that'd be the last Soundwave ever saw of him, the last his cassettes ever saw of him. Another slave dead, another failure. His family might not survive this one. Jazz was the prisoner here, the slave who'd just suffered a thorough ravaging of his mind, but somehow it was Soundwave left sitting helpless in the dark.

“Jazz... very difficult.”

“I think what you mean is, ‘Jazz seven’.”

“This question, not settled. Further consideration required.”

“You take your time, lover, I am not going anywhere. You hope.”

Soundwave stiffened, then quickly smothered the reaction Jazz was surely waiting for. He steadfastly ignored that cocky grin. He shouldn't even be bothering with Jazz right now, he should be concentrating on what he'd seen while in that head. Without his body, Soundwave had no access to recording or copying functions, which meant he had to rely on his own short-term memory if he was going to retain any of it. Codes or coordinates he could have managed. But how was he supposed to commit that bewildering cacophony of noise to memory when he couldn't even make sense of it to begin with? Too many songs, too many nonsense words, had jumbled themselves on top of one another. Soundwave remembered the images, but he couldn't recreate the music.

His symbiotes had returned. He could feel them, each relieved but anxious little spark flocking back home upon realization that he'd woken. Now all five were hovering around the building, not sure if they should come in but dying to know what had happened. Soundwave wanted to be with them, away from the mocking glow of Jazz's visor, if only to give himself space for thought.

Gingerly, he eased himself off the berth, standing still until he was sure his leg struts were prepared to bear his weight. "Jazz, come."

He only stumbled a few times. Jazz, less concerned with keeping up appearances, kept to a crawl as he followed his master out into the common room. Soundwave led him to one of the far windows, with a broad view of the street below, and sat him firmly on the sill. "Stay," he commanded, "here. Result in movement: extreme punishment. My orders, understood?"

"Clear like a bell. Master."

Soundwave braced his hand against the wall, collecting his strength, then started to move away. "Soundwave."

"What?"

Jazz bit his lip plating, looking three shades more pitiful than he had crawling across the floor. "I'm hungry."

Naturally he was. Jazz had missed five feeding times in a row and must be aching for fuel. Soundwave looked away, focusing on putting one pede in front of the other. "You will not starve. Stay, and wait."

He limped out of the loft, and locked the door behind him.

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"It's about time, what the hell happened in there -"

"We've been going crazy wondering -"

*"Master, hurt?"*

"You wouldn't wake up no matter how hard we tried -"

*"Mental interrogation, conducted?"*

"And don't think nobody else noticed either -"

"Yeah, Starscream was askin' questions -"

*"Recovery time, unusually long."*

"Shockwave nosin' around -"

"They wouldn't leave us alone, kept nagging us -"

*"Mental interrogation, successful?"*

"- to know where you were, what you were up to, we -"

"- didn't know what to say, because -"

*"Answers found?"*

"- we didn't know either!"

Almost shaking with fatigue, Soundwave lowered himself to sit on the edge of what was once an old parking dock. None of these buildings were habitable yet, leaving the alleyway beside Soundwave's home dark and empty. He remembered the night of the mid-vorn, how he and Jazz had tumbled off the roof and nearly flattened themselves on this street, but saved themselves just in time. It was a memory tinged with warmth, for Soundwave. Now it seemed distant and untouchable as a star.

The symbiotes were already swarming over him before he'd finished sitting, nipping at his joints, pounding at his armor with angry little fists, nuzzling, clinging, squeezing. They were all frantic to reassure themselves he was fine, after his unexpected fall into stasis, the only condition that left him incapable of mental contact with them. Soundwave had suffered such circumstances in the past, usually post-battle, but they'd never gotten this anxious before. Of course, now they'd seen what happened to Blaster's symbiotes.

Only Ravage managed to keep his distance. Facing Soundwave, he sat up straight with head held high, his sporadically flicking tail the only outward sign of distress. *Explain.*

"Mental interrogation on Jazz, conducted," Soundwave answered. "Investigation, thorough. Apology given for concern, long fall into stasis not predicted."

Unease rippled through all of them. Soundwave had practiced his telepathy many times in the past, and none of them had ever known him to sleep for so long afterwards. Rumble and Frenzy exchanged glances, then looked back at him.

"Well, boss? What's the answer? ... did he?"

On his knee, he felt Laserbeak's struts tighten with apprehension and dread. Without thinking about it, he looked directly at her.

"Results of interrogation, inconclusive. Unable to determine guilt."

The unease was wiped out by what could only be described as blank incomprehension. Even Ravage blinked, looking stunned.

"Whatdya mean, 'unable'?"

"Yeah, what's that supposed to mean?"

Soundwave vented wearily. "Can't," he translated, the word clipped in distaste. "Objective, failed."

Every mouth, or beak, hung open just a little. Soundwave's superiority in telepathic interrogation had gone unquestioned all their lives. And why shouldn't it? He was the smartest and strongest of his kind, the reputation of his power enough to make mecha flinch at his name. His symbiotes followed him, and trusted him, and were content to be owned by him, because of his strength. Rare was the day Soundwave failed at anything, and at interrogation - never. They hadn't even realized it was possible.

Ravage was the only one that didn't have to find words. His general inquiry - *how?* - more or less suited everyone's thoughts anyway.

Soundwave did not care to elaborate on the details. "Jazz's mind, complex," he said shortly.

"Organized according to specific protocols known only to Jazz. Therefore, results inconclusive."

The alleyway went quiet again, while everyone there struggled to internalize what Soundwave was saying. That Jazz had bested Soundwave on the turf of his own mind, that Soundwave had *lost*. He could feel their baffled minds trying to wrap around the alien concept.

"Well... okay." Frenzy had to grope for words. "So, uh, that didn't work. What does it mean? Where does that leave us?"

*"Jazz's guilt, still to be determined,"* Buzzsaw spoke up. *"Actions with Combaticons, now witnessed by all of us. Actions, highly suspicious."*

"Hang on," Rumble interjected. "Just, slow down already. I know it looks weird, I knew from the minute I heard the news that it was weird. But I've been thinking about it all day and it just doesn't make any sense. This is the Combaticons we're talking about; they're a pack of psychopaths. The Autobots should be so lucky that Megatron hasn't given any slaves to that team. Why would Jazz do anything to change that? Why go to the trouble of delivering one of the bots right into their hands?"

"Maybe he doesn't like Hound," Frenzy suggested. "If I hated somebody, and could get away with punting them into space with Vortex for company, I'd do it in a second."

*"Negative," Laserbeak denied. "Jazz, popular amongst Autobot crew, friendly to all. No internal enemies known."*

They accepted her assessment without demur. Laserbeak had spent more time than any of them spying in Autobot bases, particularly the last of them on Earth, and she would know if there had been a hostile relationship between Jazz and Hound. Even if they were not close friends, Soundwave couldn't imagine any dislike strong enough to compel Jazz to put his old comrade in danger. Protecting his fellow slaves from abuse was, indeed, the one thing Soundwave could expect from him.

*"Most obvious objective, to free Hound," Buzzsaw reminded them all. "Hound now offplanet, without tracking collar."*

"But it's not freeing him, not by a long shot! I've tangled with the bot and he's no wimp, but he was never one of the Autobots' heavy hitters. The Combaticons are mercenaries. Not even Sunstreaker could take on all four of them and win. If he was tryin' to spring a bot that way, he'd have been better off telling them to grab Grimlock."

*"Autobot can potentially sneak away."*

"In deep space?"

"And then live on what?"

"And then, maybe, just maybe if everything worked out perfect, what does Jazz get? One more bot that's gone MIA, the rest of them still slaves. Not as if nothin' would change."

The three of them fell back into a frustrated silence. Soundwave glanced up at his own building again, checking on Jazz. He hadn't moved, still slumped on the window sill, chin resting on one knee as he watched them. Was he worried? Gloating? Did they even have a chance at grasping what must be in that head?

"Maybe we're looking at this all the wrong way," Frenzy suggested. "Maybe it's not about doing anything for the bots, and all about messing with the Decepticons. He likes to embarrass the other officers - we see it all the time. This is kinda like the ultimate embarrassment for Megatron, cuz now everyone knows that he can't even keep his labor force safe from his own soldiers."

"Yeah, that could be it!" Rumble chimed in. "Everybody in Iacon already knows about it. I heard Starscream braggin' that this woulda never happened if he was in charge. If he doesn't shut up about

it then Megatron's gonna smash his head into the wall, and that'd be just the kinda thing Jazz was wanting all along."

"*Ambition likely*," Buzzsaw conceded, but hesitated when Laserbeak shook her head.

*"Risk of Autobot's safety, too high. Consider Combaticons' motivation. Desperate to find Mirage, no possibility of going back now. Hound, unlikely to track Mirage without persuasion of torture. Hound's refusal, also likely to result in termination. Combaticons cannot return without both Autobots. Failure to capture Mirage means inability to return to Cybertron, therefore starvation in space. For Hound as well as Combaticons."*

"Unless they decide to just start over on some other planet somewhere," Rumble concluded glumly. "In which case they either keep Hound for the fun of it, or kill him. And I guess Jazz wouldn't do that."

More silence. None of his little symbiotes had uttered something that Soundwave had not already considered, in the brief span of time that it took to stumble out of the loft and exit the building, and they were all getting to exactly where he had - nowhere.

Frenzy slumped to the ground with a defeated huff. "Or, maybe we're all tied up in knots over something that Jazz never meant to happen at all. Maybe he was just talkin' that day cuz he wanted to tease the Cons, and nothin' more. Maybe he's just as surprised as all of us."

"Yeah," Rumble muttered, "maybe."

"*Maybe*," Buzzsaw allowed. They all glanced at Ravage, but he was keeping his thoughts to himself for now, carefully watching and listening but nothing more. Laserbeak rubbed her beak against Soundwave's leg.

*"Jazz, now fond of our home. Jazz, happy here. No reason to destroy that happiness. Yes?"*

Soundwave would rather suffer a thousand deaths than tell her the full truth. Instead he dropped a hand on her head, stroking her plating. "This much seen in his mind: Jazz, enjoys your company. Reasonably confident, Jazz fond of you."

"Hey, me too, right?" Rumble sat up straighter, and so did Frenzy.

"Yeah, and me?"

"Affirmative."

They relaxed, looking pleased, and only Ravage noticed that Soundwave was holding something back. His audio twitched in indication, but he didn't pry and Soundwave wouldn't have told him anyway. Perhaps, more than any of the others, Ravage would have understood Jazz's burning desire for freedom, but Ravage himself was proof that such desire did not last. They didn't need to know, because it didn't matter. Jazz belonged to them forever.

*"Your response now?" Buzzsaw asked. "Master, in possession of details concerning Combaticon raid. Report to Megatron?"*

"What? No, you can't!"

"Yeah, if Megatron even thinks Jazz was part of this, he'll tear him apart!"

The twins' optics flickered with distress, and he could feel Laserbeak's spark contracting with fear. Quickly he sent all of them a soothing pulse of comfort.

"Negative. This knowledge will not be reported to Megatron."

Ravage stiffened warily at that. Images and memories played from his end of the link, pointing out the many times Soundwave had performed his duties for Megatron, how Megatron relied on him. Soundwave was Megatron's most trustworthy officer, he was *loyal*.

"This action, not a betrayal," Soundwave said firmly. "Details in reports, always my discretion. For Jazz's action, no proof of guilt found. His purpose, unknown, possibly no purpose at all. Without certain knowledge of guilt, unnecessary and ineffective to inform Megatron."

The others were relieved, but Ravage was still cautious. Soundwave had been entrusted by Megatron to keep watch over his empire; he was responsible for presenting just this sort of secret to him. They both knew that if it had been anyone else, *anyone other than Jazz*, Soundwave would have reported this.

*"Loyalty to Megatron, unquestioned," Soundwave reminded him, speaking only to him. "Loyal to Megatron, always. Also loyal to safety of my possessions. Discretion, only solution."*

Speaking of which... "This subject, absolute top secret," he cautioned aloud. "From now forward, verbal discussion of it forbidden. This knowledge, too valuable to other officers."

They all nodded. Get one whiff of what Jazz had done and the only question would be whether it was Shockwave or Starscream that trampled the other in their race to drag him before Megatron. They'd been granted a second chance for their slave, and to keep him they must protect him. Again Soundwave checked on Jazz, still watching from above. He must be so hungry.



"This discussion, concluded. Everyone dismissed. Some time alone with Jazz required. Permission to return to loft in one joor."

"Yes, boss."

*"Understood, master."*

They all had the look of wanting to regroup and think things over, and left without argument. Buzzsaw and Laserbeak took flight, circling upwards to disappear over the rooftops, and Frenzy and Rumble punched their thrusters to zoom off in the opposite direction. Ravage delayed just a few moments longer.

*Danger* swirled in his thoughts, but it was not quite the same danger he'd been afraid of when Jazz first came to them. Soundwave, busy concentrating on standing up without wobbling, ignored the pointed message.

"My decision, final. Ravage dismissed."

His oldest symbiote slunk into the shadows and disappeared, but not without a parting shot of warning. Jazz was still waiting. Soundwave put Ravage out of his mind, and turned toward his home.

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Jazz was still lounging on the window sill when Soundwave returned to the loft. Soundwave knew perfectly well that he was just as tired as he was, but somehow Jazz managed to make it look like he *wanted* to relax that way. For Soundwave with his ramrod straight posture, no one would be fooled. He decided he resented Jazz for that along with everything else.

"So? Jury says?" Jazz dropped one pede to the floor at a time, twisting gradually off the sill. "Never mind. You're here, instead of Megatron in a murderous rage, so I already know what you decided. Didn't have much doubt."

Soundwave reached into subspace for six energon treats. "Jazz, come."

He walked slowly, but carefully, across the distance between them. But when he opened his mouth in expectation, Soundwave held back from inserting the first one.

"This known: you did it. Why, not known. But you did it. I will discover why."

He inserted the energon delicately into Jazz's mouth. Jazz rolled it between his denta before swallowing, and smiled. "How nice. A new hobby for you."

*Insolent.* Soundwave held up another treat. “War, finished. Decepticons victorious, Autobots defeated. Autobots now slaves. Escape impossible.” Jazz’s gaze was fixed hungrily on the fuel between Soundwave’s fingertips, but Soundwave withdrew his hand when Jazz tried to close his mouth over it. “Repeat it.”

Jazz’s visor glittered frostily. “Escape,” he said, “impossible.”

Soundwave fed him again. “Soundwave, master. Jazz, slave.”

“Soundwave, master. Jazz... slave.” Another treat.

“Master, not enemy.”

“Master. Not enemy,” Jazz repeated. They were moving, Soundwave noticed belatedly, trying to circle one another unconsciously. But Jazz echoed him obediently, and so Soundwave rewarded him again.

“Soundwave, stronger than Jazz.”

“Soundwave, stronger than Jazz.”

“Soundwave, smarter than Jazz.”

“Oh, I do believe the game will decide that one, love.” Jazz slithered up onto the arm of the couch rather than bump into it, kneeling on it to look Soundwave straight in the optic. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

Soundwave thought that over. “Jazz, not smarter than Soundwave.”

“Touché. Only time will tell.”

Soundwave fed Jazz the last of the energon, relishing the feel of Jazz’s denta scraping lightly over his fingertips. “Mm. Thank you, master.”

“From now forward, Jazz under more careful scrutiny. Jazz, always close to me. Jazz will be *watched*.”

“So, nothing different there then.”

As if he knew that would make Soundwave bristle, Jazz was quick to slip back onto the cushions of the couch. Soundwave bent forward enough to grasp his chin, holding him still. “Also, no contact

with other Autobots.”

Smugly Soundwave noted how he stiffened, but Jazz’s visor did not even flicker. “You do realize that cutting me off from the Autobots wouldn’t have prevented what happened with the Combaticons?”

Soundwave was tempted to scowl. "Consider it punishment."

"For what? I didn't break any of your rules."

"Attempted destruction of Decepticon Empire, now against the rules."

"Aw gee, and it was on my weekend's to-do list."

Soundwave released his grip on Jazz with an abrupt twist that nearly yanked him off the couch. "Jazz will make jokes. Jazz will laugh. Your distractions, ineffective. This much known: Jazz hiding something. I will find it."

"You're accusing *me* of keeping secrets? Now isn't that the glitchmouse calling Ravage black."

Soundwave almost faltered, but faced Jazz impassively. "My promise made. Remember it."

"I remember everything," Jazz assured him, with a smile that could cut ice. "To a tune."

His braced arms slid apart and he relaxed back against the cushions, the glow in his visor fading again. Soundwave was too weak to drag him back to the berth for any more recharge, but Soundwave was not interested in sleeping anyway. He was tired too, but he'd worked in states worse than this. Soundwave stalked away from the couch, leaving Jazz to slip into a doze, and entered his office. It was time to complete the long-overdue upgrade of alarms guarding this building.

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## on corruption

“Three cycles, Soundwave,” Starscream barked. “It’s been three active cycles since that ridiculous disaster on Earth and no one’s seen nut nor bolt of you – what are you *doing* in that ramshackle hut of yours?”

“Activity: attempting to determine motivation of Combaticons.” Soundwave did not look up from his console as he spoke. Technically, at least for some part of that time, his words were truthful.

“So you said before. What is that even supposed to mean? Megatron doesn’t care why they did it, he cares that we couldn’t stop them! Do you even know what we’ve been going through here at Command?” He did not give Soundwave time to reply. “Since you refuse to come and face it yourself, I suppose I’ll have to tell you. Megatron’s decided we’re all to blame for that fiasco – though if you ask me it’s his fault for trusting those ridiculous stunt jocks to guard his fuel camps – and reduced our energon allotments. You, me, *and* Shockwave. At least he didn’t get away without catching a little shrapnel, for once.” Starscream paused to smirk, albeit briefly. “It’s still an unfair punishment. I don’t know how you can sit there, tapping at your buttons and pretending not to care.”

Soundwave already knew about the cut in his allotments, not just because Rumble and Frenzy had reported it but because Shockwave had called as well. Ten percent was harsh, but Megatron could have done worse, and it was not unbearable.

“Inability to catch perpetrators deserves punishment.”

“Kiss aft.”

“This discussion, finished?”

“Not until you tell me when you’re coming back to Command to help calm down our fuming leader. I’m tired of doing the impossible all by myself.”

“Likely return, tomorrow’s shift.”

“That’s what you said yesterday!”

“Interruptions, not helpful to speed of work,” he pointed out. “Soundwave out.” He cut the connection before Starscream could object, returning his office to silence. It did not do much to help his mood. Starscream and Shockwave were calling too often, prying into his solitude more often in the last three cycles than they had since the end of the war, and it was not because they enjoyed his conversation. Soundwave knew they sensed something was amiss. Reclusive he may be, but it was not his habit to disappear during a crisis. Soundwave could always be counted upon to slog through the mess, painstakingly cleaning up while everyone else argued and complained. His uncharacteristic absence had been noticed.

That was uncomfortable knowledge, but Soundwave consoled himself that neither Shockwave nor Starscream would ever guess the real cause. How could they? No one but Jazz himself would ever dream of something so ludicrous as an Autobot convincing Decepticons to kidnap one of his own.

Soundwave completed his task, putting the final touches on his project before leaving the office. In the common room, Buzzsaw was dozing on a windowsill while Laserbeak perched on Jazz’s knee for a grooming session. He was sweeping through her many wing platelets with a fine-haired brush, cleaning out soot and realigning the tiny fringe plating.

“Starscream called again?”

Soundwave looked sharply at Jazz, who didn’t miss a beat brushing Laserbeak’s wings. “I can tell. You have that special hunch in your shoulders.”

Jazz must be lying. As if anyone could read Soundwave’s appearance so easily.

“You can’t keep hiding us here in your little tower, you know. Every day that you refuse to go out is another day they get more suspicious.”

“Jazz will be silent.”

“Just because you’re mad at me doesn’t make me any less right.”

Soundwave sat down on the couch rather heavily, one arm extended a little ways across the cushion for Laserbeak to come and perch on. It wasn’t exactly a command, just a subtle invitation that was rare for her to decline. She caught his gaze, looked away, and resettled herself more firmly on Jazz’s knee.

Over her head, Jazz smirked at him. Insubordinate little symbiotes. All of them, with the exception of Ravage, had decided to pursue a policy of pretending that the entire episode never happened while around Jazz. Even *Rumble*, who by rights should have been angrier with Jazz than anyone for the manipulation played upon him, was still wheedling Jazz into playing video games with him and Frenzy. Soundwave knew how desperate they were to believe Jazz was innocent, still their friend and entertainment, and he sympathized with that. He, however, had no such luxury.

“Overhaul of this building’s alarm network, now complete,” he informed Jazz coolly. “Every point of entry, monitored by motion sensors. Even Ravage unable to enter home undetected.”

For which Ravage was just a little peeved, unfortunately. Nor was he was happy about spending three cycles playing the test case to Soundwave’s new alarms. Tired and irritable, he was now sulkily recharging inside Soundwave’s chest.

Jazz didn’t even bother to look up. “I told you before, Soundwave, I’ve never snuck out of your home. Never had to.”

Soundwave didn’t like the way he added that last part, but he affected not to notice.

“Still, your escape now impossible. Tomorrow, I attend Decepticon Command. You remain here.”

That got Jazz to look up, exasperation flashing across his expression. “You’re still serious about this.”

“Affirmative.”

“It’s a bad idea, Soundwave. You shouldn’t go there without me.”

“As previously stated, Jazz restricted from company of Autobots.”

“Oh I’m not worried about that,” Jazz assured him. “I’ll find a way to see my friends again no matter what. You still shouldn’t go to Command without me. They’ll notice. They noticed your absence, they’ll notice this too.”

Laserbeak cheeped a soft agreement, and Soundwave glared at her. “Not your concern. Jazz’s only concern: punishment.”

“I give it one breem. The first time Starscream gets in your face to make a nasty comment, you’re going to look around and realize I’m not there to deflect it. You’ll come running back home to fetch me.”

“Soundwave, not dependent on Jazz.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Laserbeak and Buzzsaw both flinched at the dark curdling of Soundwave’s mood, and he could swear Jazz sensed it too. He grimaced, restlessly fidgeting underneath Laserbeak, then slapped the brush on the floor with unnecessary force.

“Fine. Don’t take me. But can we at least go on our walk? Before we kill each other?”

Soundwave was tempted to answer no, just because he was still angry at Jazz and would have liked him to endure more punishment. But they had been cooped up in his home for more than three cycles now, and Soundwave was feeling just a little restless himself. This home was too small for the tension that hung so thickly in the air.

“Affirmative. Fetch chains.”

“One of these days I’m gonna hide those chains and laugh while you try to find them,” Jazz muttered, but he did as he was told. And truthfully, Soundwave did feel better once they’d left the building. The fresh air, such as it was on Cybertron, was a welcome change, and being out in the open did help to ease the strain a little. Laserbeak perked up again, coasting overhead, while Buzzsaw remained in drowsy perch on his shoulder. Jazz was quiet, but the motion of walking seemed to improve his mood too.

They wandered their usual way through downtown Iacon in silence. Hopeful vendors swarmed their way forward when they spotted their favorite customer, and impatiently Soundwave waved them away. He was in no mood to indulge Jazz today. Jazz, as usual, didn’t seem to notice one way or the other.

“Have you thought about what you’ll say to him?”

When Soundwave looked at Jazz, he was gazing at Megatron’s picture, lavishly painted across the wall of a nearby building. “You know that if Starscream and Shockwave noticed your absence, then he did too. And unlike those two, I’m sure he wasn’t happy about it. What will you say to him?”

“Megatron, not Jazz’s concern.”

“If that were true, you and I would be living in a very different world, and I’d be the happiest mech in it. Since we’re not there just yet, do have a care to walk softly. Being the favorite can only take you so far.”

“Your comments, unnecessary and disrespectful,” Soundwave replied, irritable all over again.

“Advice concerning my leader, not your place to give.”

He thought he saw a spark of anger flash across Jazz’s visor, before he turned aside. “Sorry to have forgotten my place, master. But keep the comments anyway, whether you want them or not. You can see for yourself just how *unnecessary* they were.”

He stomped away, leaving Soundwave to look away from Megatron’s fierce scowl. Buzzsaw clucked thoughtfully, and was silently ordered to hush. Perhaps this walk was not going to help, after all.

Soundwave started moving again and almost walked into Jazz, who was waving to Groove across the street. Even from this distance Soundwave could see his blue optics light up with joy, before he frantically waved back. Soundwave clapped his hand down over Jazz's and dragged him away.

"Oh come on," Jazz groaned, purposefully tripping to slow Soundwave down. "A wave? Really? Were you afraid that might be the signal to trigger our coup on the empire?"

"Lower voice," Soundwave ordered quickly, rapidly glancing around to make sure no one had looked up. "Afraid, inaccurate. As stated, restriction from Autobots a punishment."

"That punishment's never going to last and you know it. The world is too small for you to avoid letting me in the same room as Autobots, and too full of nosy Decepticons who will notice when you try."

How Soundwave hated it when Jazz was right. "That decision, mine."

"Keep this up and you'll be your own undoing, before I even get the chance to try. What a shame that'd be."

"Jazz will be silent or..."

"What?" Jazz wasn't trying to pull free of Soundwave's grasp, but he did circle in front of Soundwave, forcing him to a stop. "We're over? You'll leave me? Go ahead. I get half of everything."

Soundwave forced a full cycle of his vents. "Jazz, mine. Jazz will learn obedience and respect. Time necessary, not important. One vorn, two vorns, not a concern. Jazz will learn."

"You'd be the first..." Jazz's retort trailed off, the light in his visor canting slightly to one side. Quickly he refocused on Soundwave and grinned. "Ah, sorry, was watching something interesting there. Where were we? Arguing again? I'm sure I was winning."

Promptly Soundwave turned to look, but he couldn't see anything unusual. Just the typical stalls and their vendors, shoppers milling between them.

"What?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing you'd be interested in. You don't care about theft, right?"

Theft? Alarmed, Soundwave scanned the crowd more closely. The reconstruction of Cybertron's economy was a fragile, delicate process. Bad enough that no remnant of their financial markets had survived the war, reducing the planet to physical currency. The simple markets that traded goods for credit chips were frustratingly primitive, but a necessary beginning. If this planet would ever flourish again, a stable economy was crucial, and to achieve that stability there could be no more wartime looting. Shockwave had been adamant about it since the first days of the new empire, and Megatron agreed. The first two thieves caught after he installed his government lost their hands in a public ceremony, their struts twisted and fused to prevent reattachment. While it was true that the city lawkeepers answered to Shockwave and not him, Soundwave had no intention of allowing robbery to go on unhindered in his presence.

But he saw nothing. Moreover, there was a pair of keepers right over there, talking to a vendor. "Where?"

"Oh, *now* you're interested in what I have to say. Every observation I've made today, you've pretended not to hear. Tell me why I should start talking now?" Jazz was wearing that frustratingly

smug look, the one that made most Decepticons try to smack it right off his faceplates. Soundwave forced himself to ignore it.

“Because, order given.”

“Ah, order given. Well why didn’t you say so earlier? We both know what an obedient slave I am, when given orders.” Jazz clasped both his hands around his wrist and tugged Soundwave closer to the stalls. Soundwave hardly had time to process what was happening before Jazz had dragged him right up to the stall where the two lawkeepers stood. One of them was leaning partially into the stall, speaking to the vendor in a low voice, and though he was smiling, the vendor was not. He looked terrified.

“Here’s that shop I was talking about, master!” Jazz nearly shouted, and all three of them jumped. The keepers looked up with annoyed glares, but when they saw Soundwave their optics blanched from surprise and they snapped to attention.

“Director Soundwave, sir! All hail Megatron, sir!”

Soundwave nodded in acknowledgment, then shot a plainly quizzical look at Jazz. “I don’t care what anyone else says, this is the place with the best polish,” he announced enthusiastically, and hopped up to sit on the edge of the stall. “Remember when we used some, that one night?” His engine revved lightly, giving an altogether different impression than Soundwave could remember of any of their polishing sessions. Everyone, including him, stared at Jazz blankly.

“And, since we are both so very fond of this particular shop, my master Soundwave was very happy to see the law interviewing its owner. No doubt Iacon’s finest are doing what they can to make sure this establishment is protected from robbery.”

He flashed a brilliant smile at the lawkeepers, who looked slightly discomfited. “Please, don’t be shy. The Decepticons know how hard you work. Were you, perhaps, planning a new beat that gives better protection to the shops on this street?”

Suddenly, neither of them were interested in looking Soundwave in the optic. They mumbled something about doing their duty as ordered. Jazz’s smile got wider.

“That’s good to hear. My master visits this shop often, so he *will* notice if anything bad happens to it. He’ll discuss it with your superiors if it seems you two aren’t up to monitoring this market by yourselves.”

At this point the two lawkeepers looked fairly panic-stricken, before rapidly and ineffectively hiding their reaction. Jazz, who was quite obviously enjoying himself, crossed one leg over the other with a self-satisfied air. “I think we’re done here. He dismisses you.”

The pair hesitated, glancing at Soundwave for confirmation, but Soundwave remained ominously silent. They gulped and backed up, throwing a couple of badly-concealed resentful glares at Jazz, before they turned and marched briskly away.

“Amateurs,” Jazz muttered, but flashed a small smile at Soundwave. “Never mind, master. Seems there won’t be any theft today after all.”

“Oh sir.” The little groundpounder behind the stall, barely bigger than a minibot, was actually shaking. “Thank you, thank you so much. I- I do not have the words to express my gratitude.” He bowed a few times in rapid succession, though he couldn’t quite bring himself to look or speak directly to Soundwave.



“Not at all,” Jazz said breezily. “It was fun. I know it’s hard to tell, but Soundwave thinks so too.”

“Please, allow me to repay your kindness,” gushed the vendor. Tins of organic waxes and polishes clattered against one another as he hurried to shove them at Jazz. “It is the least I can do, for the most generous of the Decepticons.”

What? Soundwave shot a startled look at the vendor but he didn’t notice, still bobbing up and down in his pathetic display of flattery. Jazz picked up one of them, idling it between his fingertips, not in the least bit taken aback by what had just been said.

“Well, if you insist. I can think of a few scraplets that wouldn’t mind a fresh polish tonight. Don’t you agree, master?”

Jazz hopped off the stall, utterly pleased with himself. “I’m glad we took this walk after all; I actually do feel better now. I think you do too. But if you don’t…” He lightly rapped the tin of polish against Soundwave’s shoulder. “I’ll fix that soon enough.”

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“Jazz.”

“My love?”

“Query.”

“Ask away.”

“Lawkeepers’ attempted extortion against merchant, known how?”

“Memory served. Even a stylin’ superstar of the black market like myself had to start from somewhere.” Jazz spoke very matter-of-factly, concentrating on rubbing the new polish into Soundwave’s leg armor. “Corrupt bastards on the lawkeepin’ force were just part of the landscape. They find the vendors with somethin’ to hide, which ain’t hard when there’s too many laws to count, they threaten him, scare the daylights out of him, blackmail him outta his earnings in return for not haulin’ his struts into court. Then they bleed him dry til there’s nothin’ left. When I lived on the streets, I saw it every day.”

So Jazz really was a product of the slums. Soundwave filed that bit of information away for later reference and contemplation. “Chronic corruption of justice, significant flaw in Council’s rule. Decepticon government, intended to correct such corruption.”

“Meet the new boss,” Jazz sang lightly, “same as the old boss! Ah, sorry darling, those were song lyrics, probably over your head. Let me put it this way: Council bad, Shockwave worse.”

Soundwave did not bother to look down; he could hear Jazz’s cheeky grin well enough in his voice. He ignored it. “Comparison, made too lightly.”

“Don’t take my word for it, then. Remember when we had a good laugh, shouting in the market that Shockwave had come for an inspection? And by ‘we’, of course I mean *I* had a good laugh. Those vendors panicked for a reason, Soundwave. He charges too much for those permits to set up shop,

and chops off what's left for taxes. They can't afford to pay everything he demands, they'd starve if they did. They have to hide a little, and that's how the keepers have material for blackmail. It's an old dance; I know it by spark. If anything, it's worse under Shockwave than it ever was under the old government... partly because Cybertron's wealth hit rock bottom in the war, but mostly because he doesn't have the one thing the old Council did."

"What?"

"Prowl," Jazz said simply. "Nowhere in the universe was there a lawkeeper more impossible to bribe. You *can* take my personal word for that. And he made sure his underlings stayed as clean as he did. Something tells me Astrotrain and Blitzwing aren't nearly so conscientious."

Soundwave mulled this over. "This information, not detected in surveillance."

Jazz sighed and lowered his polishing cloth, sitting back on the floor so he could look Soundwave in the optic more directly. "You know what your problem is, love? I mean, besides being bossy, controlling, neurotically possessive, incapable of personal space, ignorant beyond belief about music \_"

"Jazz."

"Your problem is that you look for sedition instead of unhappiness. You hunt for criticism of the empire, but that don't come before the empire's made enough enemies. Instead of lookin' for mecha working against the government, maybe you should take a look at how the government is workin' against mecha."

"Laws and policies of Megatron's empire, not my jurisdiction."

"Suits me," Jazz said amiably. "It's a government I hate, after all. The faster it falls into a smelting pit, the better. I heckled those nobodies today because it's been a rough week, and I needed some fun. But don't misunderstand; I don't want to clean any corruption out of Megatron's rule. I want it to eat away his control from the inside out."

Soundwave looked narrowly at the calculating gleam in that visor. "That outcome, unlikely to occur."

"Every empire falls, Soundwave. It's only a matter of when. I'd say the old Council proved that well enough."

"Continue polishing."

"Yes, master."

Soundwave stood quietly, allowing Jazz to rub the new polish into his armor in slow, smooth circles. His mind, however, was not on Jazz's touch. Theft was still a threat to the developing economy, he was thinking, whether perpetrated by common pickpockets or police. It may not be his responsibility to investigate it, but Soundwave still owed his loyalty to the future of Megatron's rule. He would report this to Shockwave tomorrow, when he attended Command.

"Jazz."

"Still here, my love."

"Your motivation, questionable. But your watchfulness, appreciated."

Jazz sat back on his heels again to look up. “Are we thawing?”

“Possibly.”

“Can I go to work with you tomorrow?”

“Negative.”

“Then we’ve got a ways to go.”

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## on the job

*Something was different. Soundwave had been collecting the requested data for close to a vorn, but always sent it through transmission or - more often, lately - the client dispatched a courier. It was the first time that Shockwave demanded a personal meeting. Not that the mech had the power to demand anything of him, but he certainly acted as though he did, and Soundwave was curious enough to comply. He disliked Shockwave, and was quite sure the feeling was mutual, but work was work and the Decepticons paid very well. He was more interested in this change of routine than he was bothered about the journey into violent, unstable Kaon. Soundwave was powerfully built enough that he rarely feared for his own safety, and Ravage was lurking close by, a hidden ace if he needed it.*

*His curiosity was satisfied quickly enough. When Shockwave arrived, Soundwave barely noticed him in the shadow of the massive gray mech striding into the room. Soundwave had met many large mecha on Cybertron, some of them bigger than this building, but something about this one's size was different. His optics burned with fierce cunning, unlike the usually amiable giant mecha, and he carried himself with the raw, dangerous confidence of a combatant. Sheer power bristled from under his armor plating, and he knew it. All this closed the distance to Soundwave, steps hard and heavy enough to make anyone want to back up just a little. Soundwave barely managed not to. In a corner of his mind he could feel Ravage recoil with surprise, followed by an automatic aggression toward the new threat.*

*"Soundwave, a pleasure to meet you at last," Shockwave greeted unctuously, systems perhaps running just a little hot from keeping up with his companion's long stride. "I do apologize for summoning you to such an inconvenient location. I'd very much like to introduce you to my superior - "*

*"Champion Megatron," Soundwave finished, not having glanced at Shockwave once. "Your reputation, well known."*

*"I would certainly hope, to a mech so famous for hearing all there is to hear," Megatron answered, smile briefly touching at his lips. "But it's Commander now. My old triumphs were just games, small amusements for the crowd. I have bigger battles to fight now. I'm sure you know that too. The intel you've been delivering to us has been very helpful, not to mention astoundingly accurate. Tell me, Soundwave, is there any secret you can't uncover?"*

*"Negative," Soundwave answered promptly, well aware of how those hard, sharp optics were studying every inch of him. One word should have been enough of an answer, one word was all he'd ever spared for a client before, but this one was different. Soundwave felt the raw strength as if it were rolling off Megatron, blisteringly hot like the air in a furnace. So this was the unstoppable revolutionary force that had turned Kaon over on its head. Soundwave had already formulated the probabilities of the insurgent Decepticons carrying this revolution to the highest tier of Cybertron's government; after less than a breem in Megatron's actual presence, he was reworking his projections. Megatron radiated true leadership like he did his own power, and Soundwave could already see that he would not suffer to be held back by incompetence.*

*"My talents, considerable," Soundwave elaborated. "Hacking skills, superior to any network's defense. Both electronic and physical infiltration inflicted on targets regularly. Never caught, never incarcerated. Millions often spent to protect information from me. Millions, always wasted."*

*Megatron laughed at that, a robust and good-humored sound that was at odds with his hard appearance. Shockwave, at least as far as Soundwave could tell, was not nearly so amused.*

*“Yes, well, we’ve certainly spent enough for the favor of your services. I should hope it was worth every credit.”*

*“Every patrol, every carelessly unguarded shipment, every supposedly top-secret federal cell, and he’s pointed us to them all, Shockwave. I say it is worth it, both in terms of ground gained and the minimized damage to my own troops. Soundwave is obviously worth his weight. I want him on the roster.”*

*That Shockwave obviously had not been expecting, and neither had Soundwave. Both of them shot Megatron startled glances.*

*“My lord?”*

*“Commander Megatron, all expertise in intelligence and espionage. Military experience and training, none.”*

*“Well, you’ve hacked enough of the military’s networks to have learned a few things, I expect,” Megatron answered carelessly. “And I’ve no doubt you’ll learn more. But I’m mostly interested in your ‘intelligence and espionage’. I need more of that, and you don’t fail to deliver. But the revolution is gaining fast, and I don’t have time to send requests and negotiate prices anymore. I need you at my beck and call, Soundwave, with the answers ready before I even ask the questions. I need you to be a part of the Decepticons. I think you need me too.”*

*Work had been growing scarcer, as the fighting spread. Soundwave thought about the two little mechs back in his home, giggling as they wrestled under his chair. Four mouths to feed now, and how safe was that little flat, anyway?*

*“Guarded living space and fuel for symbiotes, required.”*

*“Done. You can have a bunk in the same base where I and my top officers sleep. And as much fuel as you need.”*

*Megatron seemed quite oblivious to Shockwave’s dismayed posture as he extended his hand. Soundwave recognized the traditional handgrip shared between gladiators before a match, and copied it as best he could.*

*“I look forward to your service, Soundwave. I expect great things from you.”*

*“Always, Commander Megatron,” Soundwave answered, refusing to wince when Megatron applied his full strength to his grip. “You will not be disappointed.”*

Soundwave was not sure how long he’d been standing here, in Megatron’s outer office, staring at the keylock as though it would spring open the doors on its own. A few nanokliks? More time than Soundwave had ever hesitated on Megatron’s threshold before, anyway. No point to it, not for that or ancient memory files. He’d come here with a purpose, time to accomplish it. That was, after all, the trait that first attracted Megatron’s attention in the first place. He raised his hand, and pressed the button.

Soundwave waited patiently for the keylock to scan his presence, announcing him within the office, but Megatron’s raised voice did not call out for him to enter. Instead one door cracked open, allowing just enough space for Bluestreak to slip out. Soundwave watched his optics dart hopefully around the room, and his doorwings wilt with disappointment when he found no Jazz.

“I’m sorry, sir.” His voice was barely above a whisper, and he did not look higher than Soundwave’s knees. “But my master is very busy now, and does not wish to be disturbed.”

Soundwave looked at the opaque doors behind Bluestreak, thick, solid, and uncompromising. “Megatron knows identity of visitor?”

“Yes sir.” Those doorwings were twitching with severe discomfort now, and he would not raise his eyes. “He knows.”

“Audience with Megatron, necessary.”

“He says you may return later, and he will probably be able to see you. But he will not see you now.” Bluestreak cleared and rebooted his vocalizer. “Please. He’s been...” His voice dwindled to nothing before he made the mistake of complaining, but the fresh dents in his armor said enough anyway. He made a pitiful picture, but absurdly, Soundwave could not argue with him. Megatron had made his meaning clear enough.

“Message, understood. Later return, intended.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Soundwave turned to go, and he was mostly out the door when Bluestreak summoned up the courage to speak again. “Will Jazz be with y-”

The door swished shut behind him.

---

Soundwave’s first and most tempting inclination, after leaving Megatron’s suite, was to flee the building and go straight back home. He quashed it, with some effort. Megatron was not the only one he’d come to see today, and anyway Soundwave knew putting in an appearance here was well overdue. It was probably for the best that as many mecha as possible saw him here today, going about his business. He would just return to his office and quickly check on Jazz, then pay a visit to Shockwave’s office. Provided, of course, that he could get back to his office without obstacle. Soundwave’s stride faltered when Starscream burst unexpectedly out into the hall, but it was too late to back up and escape. Luckily, Starscream was busy – as usual – running his vocalizer.

“- said no. Leave it alone, Thundercracker, I’m busy enough dealing with the things I actually care about.”

“But you haven’t even asked him.” Thundercracker snagged Starscream by the elbow and held him back, earning an exasperated glare from hiswingmate. “You could at least ask.”

“No, I haven’t, and no, I couldn’t ‘at least’. I told you, he will say no. Actually, he will yell it, and throw me out of his office, probably literally. Haven’t you noticed he’s been in something of a mood these past few days? Now is not the time to bring up the subject of Autobots.”

“It’s because of what just happened that he’s so upset,” Thundercracker persisted, not letting go in spite of Starscream’s repeated tugging. “It’s not as if I’m asking to send him through the bridge alone. I’d take him with me, if I could just get an assignment on Earth. I’ll fly a patrol, hunt for

Sideswipe, whatever Megatron wants.”

“I can’t get our *wise* leader to sign off on a simple science expedition. He’s not going to let you through that bridge for what he thinks is a joyride, especially not with that foambrained jet of yours in tow. Why you even bother to care about the cross-opticked twit, I don’t know. He doesn’t have two thoughts in his head to rub together.”

“He just has a hard time concentrating, and being separated from his brothers doesn’t help. I figure it’s even worse than being cut off from your trine. Just one day –“

“I’ve said my last no, Thundercracker. Give him a toy if you want to cheer him up; I’ve got bigger problems to solve.”

Starscream peeled Thundercracker’s grip off his arm and turned to go, which is when they both realized Soundwave had been a silent audience to the entire conversation.

“Well, look who remembered where Decepticon Command is,” Starscream sneered. “How gracious of you, Soundwave, to pop by and say hello. Don’t mind the mess, we’re just busy trying to keep the empire running.”

His smirk took on a thoughtful air as he sauntered closer. “Now then, what’s different about you? Wait, don’t tell me... oh, I know! I’ve been talking to you for six nanokliks and there’s no smart-aleck slave jumping forward to defend you. Lost him on the way in? Seems to be a lot of that going around lately.”

Jazz would have responded to that with a flurry of jokes and insults, but Soundwave simply looked at Starscream in silence. “I hope you still know how to get around without him here to hold your hand - I have my doubts. Really, you do look so *incomplete* without that little bot at your elbow. Whatever caused you to leave him behind, I wonder? Do tell.”

“Starscream.”

“Yes, Soundwave?”

“Your presence, blocking my way. Suggestion: move.”

Starscream’s lips curved into a nasty smile. “Of course, Soundwave. You know I would never dream of interfering with your busy schedule. Do get on with your spying and eavesdropping. The fate of Cybertron depends on it.”

With a flick of the wings, Starscream slipped around him and continued on his way, heels clacking at irritably high volume against the metal floor. That left just Thundercracker, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, looking faintly sulky.

“Don’t suppose you’d rent me Jazz for a day,” he muttered. “I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

“Request denied. Jazz, mine.”

Soundwave walked past Thundercracker without even looking at him, but he heard the quiet snarl of jet engines. “I was an idiot to let Warp finish that card game. I’d undo it in a minute if I could.”

Soundwave ignored that and kept walking; after a few nanokliks, he could hear Thundercracker stalking off in the opposite direction. Though he knew his appearance was calmly indifferent, internally Soundwave seethed with protective fury. Everybody in this building was obsessed with Jazz, Autobots and Decepticons alike. It seemed everyone wanted to steal him

away from Soundwave, lurking just out of reach, waiting for their chance. Vultures. The thought made him hurry his steps a little, closing the distance to his office at a brisk clip. Not that he didn't have full faith in Ravage's abilities, but Soundwave had learned well that Jazz had an amazing talent for pulling off the impossible. So even though he was *quite* sure that his new alarm grid was impenetrable, and even though he was *extremely* sure that Jazz really was penned up in his home, Soundwave still left nothing to chance. Before leaving his home, Soundwave had affixed one of his cameras up in the corner of the common room and looped the signal into one of his office monitors. This way, he'd smugly informed Jazz, Soundwave would be able to check on Jazz as many times as he liked during the day.

"Your orders," he'd told Jazz, "remain in this room. Camera, always monitoring you. Now, even in Headquarters, able to see you at all times."

"Can you see this?" Jazz had then asked, flashing some hand gesture at the camera that Soundwave had seen Rumble and Frenzy copy from the humans. Soundwave had ignored that, fed Jazz extra, and left in cold silence. Jazz was still petulant about being left behind, and wouldn't even look at him when he walked out. Soundwave had not yet been gone for ten breems, but all this unwelcome attention to Jazz was triggering his anxiety about leaving him alone. Soundwave hurried on to his office and keyed open the door, optics seeking out the monitor that showed his home.

Jazz was still there. His vents exhaled with relief, even if Jazz, in his inimitable way, was already at work trying to give him a headache. Using what looked like Ravage's polish, he'd scrawled across the floor "*miss me yet?*" in full view of the camera. Soundwave didn't mind. As long as Jazz was making trouble, needling at Soundwave, scribbling taunting remarks and then lying beside the words to read his datapad in utterly pretended nonchalance, then that was proof that Jazz was still *his*. Everything else would be fine, as long as that did not change. He pressed his fingertips against the screen, reassuring himself, and decided that Shockwave could wait. He would stay in here a little while, with Jazz there on the monitor, and get some work done.

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Shockwave's office - or rather, the wing of Headquarters that housed his several offices - was a radically different environment from Soundwave's office. His own personal space was small, though perfectly adequate for his needs, quiet, and private. No one was allowed inside but Soundwave and his own symbiotes. Though he only ever used it when he came to the building, it was still very much his, and too full of sensitive information to open to an outsider. In contrast to that quiet seclusion, this suite of offices was in minor chaos, full of low-ranked Decepticons and civilians scurrying about. Shockwave had jurisdiction over so much of Iacon; demolition permits, building permits, tax collection, vendor permits, public services administration, infrastructure maintenance, and probably other kinds of permits Soundwave didn't even know about - all this passed through Shockwave's claws. It was the trivial, troublesome part of ruling an empire that Megatron wanted no part of, and was all too willing to dump onto Shockwave's desk. He was, after all, the most experienced Decepticon in matters of governance, and Soundwave knew some of the functions being taken care of in here were vital to Iacon's development. But surrounded by this bureaucratic army, Soundwave couldn't help but wonder if perhaps Shockwave was wielding more power in the city than the rest of them put together. It was a disquieting thought.

He navigated his way through the maze of workstations, noting that many more had been added since he was here last. Shockwave's office, though, was still where he remembered it, large and



walled off from the main suite for privacy. For the second time that day, he pressed an announcement button on the door's keylock and waited. A few more nanokliks than was necessary passed, before the door quietly unlatched itself.

"Enter." Shockwave's voice, filtered through the keylock, was cool and imperious.

Already Soundwave's struts were stiffening defensively, an unpleasant consequence of coming here to Shockwave's territory. This would have been easier on neutral ground. Soundwave pushed open the door and strode in, knowing he could at least rely on his impassive outward appearance to mask any hesitation.

"Director Soundwave, what an unexpected, and rare, honor. What brings you to Decepticon Command today?"

"Some work requires attention, must be accomplished here."

"And is there something in particular you need from me?"

"Affirmative." Shockwave had not invited him to sit, so Soundwave helped himself to a chair.

"Discussion of Enforcer Squad activities, necessary."

"Oh? I was not aware that law enforcement came under your responsibilities."

"Enforcers, not my responsibility," Soundwave agreed, though with a subtle rephrasing that Shockwave may or may not have noticed. "However, inappropriate activity on part of two enforcers recently witnessed."

"Then report their designations to Squad Commanders Astrotrain and Blitzwing. I delegated operation of the lawkeepers to them for a reason; I'm kept rather busy as it is with running Iacon."

"Policies pursued in governance of Iacon, partly a concern here."

Shockwave's gaze, which had been straying back to his console screen, immediately snapped back to Soundwave. "I beg your pardon?"

Soundwave steeled himself. "Incident: two enforcers attempting to extort payment from vendor lacking proper permits."

"Is that all? Well, overeager enforcers get a little carried away now and then. Report it to the triplechangers and they will see to it that the vendor is properly fined."

"Punishment of vendor, not primary concern," Soundwave corrected. "This practice, possibly widespread."

"You mean there are large numbers of commoners in that market not registered with my department? Then perhaps we need to step up enforcement patrols."

"Negative; that meaning, not my intention. This practice of extortion, possibly widespread. Extortion possible when regulations too numerous."

There it was, that frosty glow in his single optic. Shockwave never flew into a screeching tantrum like Starscream did, but that didn't mean he didn't have his own ways of showing anger.

"Too numerous, Soundwave? After centuries of war-spawned lawlessness on this planet, you believe there can be too many laws? I'm surprised; as one of our more disciplined, dependable soldiers, I assumed you had high regard for rules."

“Regard for military discipline, high,” Soundwave assured him. “Same also for civilian enforcement squad. Apparently, current environment provides too much temptation for blackmail.”

“Environment?” Shockwave echoed coldly.

“Observation: most mecha struggling to make profit through sales in market. Expensive permits, outside their ability to pay. Some merchants operate without them, creating opportunities for extortion. Practical solution: lower cost of registration, or eliminate permits completely.”

“I see. There are too many mechs breaking the law, so we should do away with the law rather than punish the criminal. What a peculiar solution.”

“That statement, oversimplifi-”

“I never took you to be so soft-sparked, Director Soundwave. Are you really apologizing for criminals and their choices?”

“Negative. But consideration, ‘criminal’ too strong a designation for lack of permit. These laws, unnecessary. Merchants will sell goods in marketplace easily without permits.”

“Did you just call one of my laws *unnecessary*?” Shockwave hissed, optic flaring gold-white.

“What do you know about it? Did you even consider the revenue from those permits that my agencies require to function? My department of commerce could not exist on its share of general taxes alone, nor should it. I designed it to regulate and promote the new post-war businesses; why should the mecha that it serves not also pay for it? It’s not only necessary, but fair as well.”

Shockwave, who saw fit to contribute empire resources to business ventures by his friends, was hardly one to speak of fairness. Soundwave elected not to voice that aloud and instead kept to his objective. “Your department, not promoting these merchants. Instead, charging them for permission to do business.”

“Only to recover the cost of regulation and administration, nothing more. Without proper registration and licensing, those street markets would become lawless, chaotic affairs. You weren’t here while I was governing Cybertron *alone*, Soundwave, you don’t know anything at all.”

Soundwave bristled at that. “This much known: lawkeepers entrusted with guarding population now exploiting them instead.”

“If our enforcers are identifying those merchants who have avoided their registration responsibilities, then they are doing their jobs. I suggest you return to your office and do the same. I will run my agencies how I see fit, with Megatron’s approval. He did not ask for your thoughts on marketplace regulations, and neither will I.”

This was going nowhere. Shockwave was thoroughly angry and not going to listen to reason, that much was obvious. Soundwave decided to stop wasting his time, and stood up.

“Understood. Your time, appreciated.”

“Good day, Director Soundwave.”

His head moved in a fraction of a bow, barely visible, before he turned and exited the office.

---

Rumble and Frenzy were waiting for him out in the hall: impatient, skeptical, and not at all blind to his worsening irritation.

“What the slag were you doing in there, boss?”

“Yeah, didja lose something? Like, any chance of having a good day?”

“Some discussion with Shockwave necessary. Results unsatisfactory, but now concluded.”

“Good, maybe now you won’t be so cranky.” He didn’t stop walking and they both fell in on either side of him, trotting five steps to his one. “Or maybe that was from Starscream?”

“Yeah, we heard you already brushed up against that fun.”

“Word travels fast.”

“Starscream’s tellin’ everyone you got lost on the way to your own office.”

“Starscream, irrelevant.”

“I wish. He already asked us both why Jazz isn’t here.”

“Your response?”

“Told him to go frag himself. Then ducked and ran.”

“Suggestion, simply ignore Starscream.”

“Tch. As if anyone but you can do that.”

“Jazz was right, though. Everyone’s noticed.”

“That microscope bot looked at me like I’d kicked over his energon cube.”

“It was annoying.”

“Opinions of others, unimportant.”

“Well what about our opinions?”

“Yeah, we want Jazz here too.”

“It’s more fun when he’s here.”

“You never know what he’s gonna do!”

“That fact, reason for his restriction to home.”

“Maybe so, but you know you miss him.”

“We saw what he wrote on the floor.”

“Jazz must be kinda bored, home alone.”

“Hey, maybe he misses you too.”

“This discussion, conjecture and irrelevant. Now concluded.”

“Aw, you never -” Frenzy broke the flow of pestering when he finally paid attention to his surroundings. “Wait a nano, where are we going?”

“This isn’t the way to your- oh slag, boss, did you really forget the way to your office?”

“Negative,” Soundwave huffed exasperatedly. “Not returning to office now, visiting Enforcers’ department.”

“What? Why you gotta go to the wannabe wing?”

“Small errand only. Your assistance, not required.”

“Good, because we wouldn’t have gone anyway. C’mon Frenz, let’s go see if Jazz is doing tricks for the camera again.”

They scampered off, just before Soundwave reached the door to the lawkeeper division. Firmly putting the subject of their chatter out of his mind, he pushed it open. Enforcement, housed in a separate wing of the sprawling headquarters building, lacked the frantic atmosphere of Shockwave’s suite. The enforcers filed in and out frequently, but nobody was hurrying and everyone had plenty of time to joke and chat with their friends. All of them bore the distinctive purple stripe along the left side of their frames, the closest any civilian Megatron would permit to mimicking the Decepticon insignia. These mecha were not Decepticons, and would probably never be Decepticons no matter how much they hoped for it; that much was obvious in their lack of military training. Not to mention their slovenly unawareness of a newcomer in their midst. Not until Soundwave had almost reached the main office did a lieutenant bother to notice his presence. Startled, he shot out of his chair and saluted.

“Director Soundwave, sir! Can I be of assistance, sir?”

“Audience desired with squad commanders Astrotrain and Blitzwing.”

“Yes sir. Let me just –“

Soundwave walked right past him and pushed open the doors, entirely fed up with waiting for permission to enter offices today. He outranked both these mechs, and saw no reason to wait.

Astrotrain and Blitzwing were each in their respective halves of the large office, both of them leaning back in their chairs, their giant clunky pedes propped up on their desks. Their attention, it seemed, was entirely absorbed in playing a game of catch with a heavy iron pipe.

“Yeah?” Blitzwing drawled, not taking his optics off the pipe as he cast it across the room.

“Whatdya need?” Astrotrain added, just managing to catch it without having to move from his position. Their slave, in a small corner workstation and surrounded by data pads, was the only one that looked up at Soundwave’s entrance. Blue optics paling with surprise, he stared.

“First,” Soundwave answered stiffly, “your attention.”

The pipe clattered against Blitzwing’s armor when he fumbled the catch, and promptly he threw it back over his shoulder. Both of them stumbled to their feet.

“Soundwave, sir!”

“How can we help you, sir?”

“Complaint necessary against two Enforcement subordinates.”

“Complaint? Against some of *our* mechs? Were they were rude to you?”

“Negative. Witnessed attempt at extortion.” Soundwave had already assembled a brief report on the incident, complete with the serial numbers designated to each enforcer, and handed the datapad to Astrotrain. He squinted at it, looking a shade confused. “So, they didn’t do anything to you at all?”

“Negative.”

“They were just trying to squeeze some creds out of a streetmech?”

“Were they beating the slag outta him?” Blitzwing asked, looking more intrigued than dismayed.

“Negative, verbal threats only.”

“So... what do you care?” Astrotrain looked back and forth from the datapad to him, blank. “They treated you with the right attitude, right? Who cares if they hassled some punk criminal?”

Soundwave could feel his temper growing short. “Status of merchant, criminal or otherwise, irrelevant. Consistent exploitation of vendors, considered theft. Theft, a threat to post-war economy. Therefore, punishment required. See to it.”

Astrotrain still looked blank, but he shrugged. “Uh, okay. I mean, yes sir.” Again he scanned the datapad in his hand. “Blitz, this was in your sector of the city. You take care of it.”

He tossed the datapad across the room, and Blitzwing caught it neatly. “But these were your guys,” he pointed out, after glancing at it. “Nice try, but this one’s yours to deal with. Punk.”

He threw it back at Astrotrain, who failed to catch it due to an impatient Soundwave snatching it mid-air. If all these two ever did was play catch, with pipes or responsibility, it was no wonder the enforcers outside were so sloppy. Privately Soundwave despaired of ever having a truly effective lawkeeping department.

He marched over to the Autobot in the corner, apparently the only one doing any work in this room. Bumblebee hadn’t understood any of the conversation, of course, and watched him come closer with big, apprehensive optics. This was, in fact, the first time in quite a long time Soundwave had seen the little yellow bot so close, and he noted that his audial sensors were still as burnt and mutilated as they’d been before. Obviously an injury outside the scope of self-repair. That would be Shockwave’s doing; Bumblebee’s capture on Cybertron near the end of the war had been an irresistible opportunity for intelligence, but Soundwave was not planetside to conduct an interrogation. Shockwave had fallen back on more brutal techniques, holding hot welders to the sensitive audio horns, and according to those present, the screams could be heard through the entire base. But he’d never talked.

Now he was deaf to the world, all the more so since the Autobots’ access to their own comms was disabled, enduring a silent slavery. Soundwave was fairly certain Hook had the materials and expertise to replace the sensors, but it would be expensive and certainly these two weren’t bothered about it. In any case, his intelligence and perceptive, espionage-trained sight obviously hadn’t suffered. Soundwave held out the datapad and pointed at the screen, directing him to read both the report and the recommended punishment: one full orn under internal arrest, with censures marked in their files. No blank or uncomprehending stare here; Bumblebee’s optics darted across the screen and he nodded rapidly.

"Yes... sir," he said carefully, trying to keep control over vocalizer volume without the benefit of hearing his own voice. "I will... log that... right now, sir."

Soundwave nodded in acknowledgement, then turned around. Both triplechangers were staring at him, mouths slightly agape. "This discussion concluded. Return to," he paused, "work." And without another word, he departed the office.

---

Over the centuries, Soundwave had watched how Megatron used sound to show his anger. More often than not he wielded it at audio-crushing levels, and to good effect. Mecha cowered before his explosive outbursts, punctuated by heavy fists against the wall (or armor), and that was nothing compared to the roar of his fusion cannon. When he was in the mood, Megatron could display his anger with all the force and fury of one of Earth's thunderstorms and he knew it. Then there were other times, when he was in a different sort of mood, that he showed his anger by making no sound at all. Silence would stretch the air thin around him, deafening in its own right, a hollow where the yelling ought to have been.

This, Soundwave thought, was decidedly unpleasant. Megatron's optics moved down the screen of his console, taking his time, and still Soundwave stood waiting. Beyond the lavish window the skyline of Iacon glowed, at least in patches, and Soundwave watched the many lights twinkle and flicker behind Megatron's massive shoulders. He was very close to escaping out into that city, had put in a very long shift here at Command, but he couldn't go without taking care of this last responsibility. Unpleasant or not.

At last Megatron sat back in his chair, deigning to look at him. "Yes, Soundwave? Did you want something?"

Soundwave produced an encrypted datapad and held it out in offering. "Analysis of theft incident conducted. Fuel camp defenses investigated for flaws, recommendations made to prevent similar action. This report, result of several joors examining camp construction. Submitted now for your consideration."

It was all true, every word of it, even if Soundwave had pored over the project for three cycles just to have an excuse when he finally returned. While busy upgrading and tightening the alarms on his own home, it had been a simple enough task to analyze the Earth base and do the same. Maybe Soundwave's own slave had been responsible for what happened there and maybe he wasn't, but at least Soundwave could prevent it from ever happening again.

Megatron studied him thoughtfully, took the datapad, and set it aside without looking at it. "Out."

Soundwave only suffered a nanoklik of uncertainty before Bluestreak rose to standing, bowed, and limped out of the office. Megatron waited until the door had shut before speaking again.

"What's... different about you, Soundwave?"

His vents hitched slightly, hopefully unheard, and Soundwave lowered his gaze a fraction. "Query, not understood."

"Much as I'd rather die than admit Starscream is right about anything, he has lately been pestering me about how very little we see of you. Tell me he's wrong, because for once, I can't."

Soundwave could say nothing.

"Do you remember, when we first met, what I said when I allowed you to join the Decepticons? I said I wanted you at my beck and call, to be there with the answers before I asked the questions. I needed an intelligence officer I could rely on, someone sensible and trustworthy. And for all those vorns at war, you were that officer. I never had to look further than behind my own shoulder and you'd be there, taking care of things, helping me win my victory. Now, you're a vanishing act."

"Consideration, report necess-

"I wasn't done," Megatron said sharply, and Soundwave locked up his vocalizer. "I'm not just talking about these past few cycles, Soundwave, even if that's what it took for me to really notice what's happened to you. You never come to Headquarters, except for when you drag yourself here like it's a chore; I barely ever see you out in the city. After centuries of war, just when we've won Cybertron, you disappear into your home and refuse to enjoy what we fought so hard for. It's as if you're hiding, as if you don't even want to be associated with my cause."

"Negative," Soundwave hurried to say. "Pride in status as Decepticon officer, strong. Loyalty to your cause, total."

"Then what's *different*?" Megatron snapped, an edge of the forthcoming thunderstorm in his voice. "What happened, Soundwave? What's changed?"

The look on his face made Soundwave writhe internally. He'd disappointed Megatron, and he was not accustomed to the feeling. The silence dragged on too long while he tried to formulate an answer that was not a lie but would satisfy Megatron.

"This... environment, post-war, still strange. My expertise, mainly warfare intelligence. Previously, industrial espionage. Now, responsible for surveillance of peacetime population. Strong concern for job performance, total concentration necessary. This concentration, strong reason for my seclusion."

He couldn't quite tell what Megatron made of that. He was sitting very still as Soundwave spoke, gazing at him with a thoughtful glow in the optics. "Your work ethic is commendable, Soundwave. And I know you'd never lie to me. But I don't think that's all the reason, and I know why you won't talk about it. You're still upset about that... thing with the little Autobots, aren't you?"

Taken by surprise, Soundwave froze and couldn't answer. Megatron seemed to take his silence for affirmation. "It was when their systems started to fail that you started disappearing from the office, sending in your work remotely, requiring a summons before you'd set foot in Headquarters. I thought you'd come back after they finally died, but still you stayed at home, hiding in the shadows. I know that you hate to fail, Soundwave. It's what I've always respected about you. And I know you couldn't bear to face me after failing to keep the slaves alive. But I meant it when I told Starscream, I wasn't angry about it. You seemed so troubled about the whole affair, far more than you ever had to be. You don't have to keep holding yourself responsible when I've granted leniency."

Now he was looking at Soundwave expectantly, waiting for the correct response, which Soundwave somehow managed to pry out of his vocalizer. "Megatron's forgiveness, appreciated. ... Accepted gratefully."

"Good. Maybe now I'll see a little more of you, with *or* without minor disasters on Earth. I do still consider you to be my most reliable Decepticon; don't prove my trust misplaced."

The promised storm had faded from his voice; he wasn't going to yell. Though his spark was crushing under the familiar grief, Soundwave allowed his vents to exhale.

"Understood, Lord Megatron. Attendance, performance will improve. Your approval, strongly desired."

"Oh, I'm quite certain of that. You've got a new slave now, after all, and he seems to please you very much. Is that right?"

For the second time, Soundwave froze. "Affirmative, Lord Megatron."

"He is a pretty little thing, isn't he? And so talented in the berth. Just remember that he's there because I allow it." The cool, crimson glow of Megatron's optics seemed to cut right through Soundwave. "I allow *everything*, in my empire."

Helplessly, Soundwave bowed. "Understood, Lord Megatron."

"I'm sure I am. Dismissed."

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"...only place in days you haven't been!" Jazz finished, with a touch of aggressive triumph. Still standing in his own doorway, Soundwave watched Jazz swirl a fingerful of black polish across his chest glass, tracing the English characters of the words he'd been half-singing as the door slid open. Only after he finished did Jazz look up and actually make optic contact with him.

"Ah, Soundwave, just in time! It's been a horribly quiet and boring day here by myself. Oh, and we're out of black polish." He held up a thoroughly scraped out tin to demonstrate, and Soundwave's gaze moved past Jazz to the rest of the room. At his feet, Rumble and Frenzy were pulling triple and quadruple-takes.

"Primus in the pit. You wrote *all over* the walls!"

"And the ceiling. How the frag did you get all that up on the *ceiling*?"

"I had time to kill. Don't worry, my love, it's all song lyrics, so you won't understand a word of it. George Straight, Louis Armstrong, Pearl Jam, Sam Isaac, take your pick, I had lots of material to choose from. Guess I'm not the only one to sit around, waiting for that special someone to come back home. Did you have to be gone so long?"

Restlessly Jazz paced back to the couch, not even bothering to check on his master's reaction to the mess. Which was *very displeased*. "Jazz... will clean this now."

"You have cleaning drones, as I recall." He threw a pointed look at the twins, both of whom preened a bit.

"This, your mess. You clean it. No argument."

"First tell me about your day. Every detail, don't leave a thing out." Jazz hopped up to sit on the back of the couch, tapping his pedes against one another and looking at him pleadingly. "Who did you see? What happened? Anything interesting? Any fights?"

"Not your concern," Soundwave snapped, wiping a fingertip through the smears on his chest and looking at it in disgust. "Jazz's confinement here, a punishment. Obligation to relate events at



Headquarters, nonexistent."

His audios caught a slightly exasperated huff from Frenzy's vents, and neither did he miss the way he poked Rumble and rolled his optics.

"It was my *understanding* that my punishment was separation from the other Autobots. Now I can't even ask a Decepticon about his day at the office? What you were doing, while I was stuck here alone with only a puzzle game for company - of which I have beaten every last level? Examine that chunk of ice in your chest that you call a *spark* and see if you can't bring yourself to at least give me a few highlights. It's not as if I'm asking for much."

They glowered at one another while Rumble and Frenzy switched on the entertainment console. "He walked around the building and picked a fight with everyone he met," Rumble supplied. "It was kinda weird, actually. Almost like he had to make up for you not being there."

"That statement, not tr-

"No, I'd say that's about right," Frenzy added. "He hit every major wing in the building, even the Enforcer department."

Jazz stiffened, visor snapping with new interest. "You went into the lawkeeps' office? Did you see- ah, never mind. If I ask you you'll just assume it's part of my plot to overthrow the empire. Primus forbid I even know if an Autobot is at least okay."

His engine growled unhappily and Jazz hopped back down off the couch, stomping out onto the balcony. Without pause he rolled up and into a handstand on the balcony rail, deliberately setting off all of Soundwave's silent alarms.

"Isn't it about time you guys made up already?" Rumble complained, waiting for their game to boot up. Soundwave noted that Jazz might have wanted to make trouble, but he wasn't stupid - he'd left the giant screen of the game console clean and untouched.

"Yeah, aren't you tired of the fighting? Cuz we sure are."

"Jazz requires punishment."

"If it's his punishment, then why are *you* the miserable one?"

Soundwave started to protest, realized it would be a lie, and gave it up as a lost cause. Their optics had wandered over to the screen anyway, plainly done with the whole mess and wishing he would just be done with it too. Soundwave turned away from them and entered his office, where he switched off the alarms. Then he went out onto the balcony. Jazz was still upside down, balancing as easily and comfortably on the rail as most mechs could stand on their own two pedes. Pointedly he did not look at Soundwave, who did not approach Jazz and simply gazed out at the city.

"Autobot Bumblebee, functioning at full apparent health, disregarding audial injury. Appearance signaled reasonable cheer." In the corner of his vision, he saw Jazz turn his head a fraction.

"Really?"

"Affirmative. Assessment: high workload stimulating mental acuity."

"Triples are still making him run the office?"

"Apparently."

Jazz snorted softly. "Well that's fine. Should come in handy someday. And Bee likes to keep busy, takes his mind off things." A brief smile touched his lips, and though he remained on his hands, something about the way he held himself seemed less tense. "What were you even doing in there? Isn't that Shockwave territory?"

"Visit to Enforcer department, recommended by Shockwave. Visited his office to discuss threat of endemic corruption among enforcers, possibly due to overabundance of business regulation."

"Did ya now?" Smoothly and without hesitation, Jazz swiveled on his hands, angling himself better to face Soundwave. Then he moved to balance on just one hand instead of two, splitting his legs for balance. "You know if you wanted to pick a fight with Shockwave, it'd have been faster to just march into his office, spin him around, and kick him hard in the aft. Also more entertaining."

"Intention, not to trigger conflict. Intention only to address issue of regulation."

"And what did I say yesterday about leaving it alone?"

"Left unchecked, widespread corruption and theft a threat to Decepticon Empire."

"Right!"

"That outcome, not desired."

"Oh. Right." Jazz flashed a slightly abashed, and upside down, grin at him, then concentrated on bending himself into another unlikely posture. "Still, look at you, hero to the masses and all that. Didn't think you had it in you."

"Supposition correct. My function, surveillance of population, not administration of their laws. Brought issue to Shockwave's attention, issue dismissed by Shockwave, matter now closed."

"I wonder if Shockwave will see it that way. I warned you about him before, love - if I'm not mistaken, we were even in this exact same position. I remember telling you that Cyclops is a very jealous mech, and he doesn't like to share his power or his influence on Megatron. If he thinks you're out to steal any of it, he'll come after you with everything he's got."

"Shockwave hates Starscream."

"Shockwave hates Starscream for being his opposite. Shockwave hates you for being too alike. He wants to be the only good kid."

Soundwave thought about that day he'd first met Megatron, the dismay in Shockwave's voice when Megatron invited him into the Decepticons. His all-too apparent jealousy when Megatron had begun to rely on Soundwave, shifting more and more authority onto no threat to me."

"You ain't at war anymore, sweetspark. Hope you know what you're doin'."

"Soundwave, superior."

"How could I forget?"

He dropped back down into an upright crouch, but only so he could immediately spring backward onto his hands again. "And how is our dear leader?"

Soundwave's spark flinched at the memory of Megatron, his words dark and cold with

promise. "His suggestion: I appear in Headquarters more frequently."

"Suggestion, huh? With fists or without?"

"Without." *Just remember that he's there because I allow it.* "Fists, preferred."

"Ouch. But how many times did I try to warn you about that? So I won't feel sorry for you, not on that count. You always knew he'd tighten his grip someday."

"Yes. That inevitability, known."

"Are you going back tomorrow?"

"Affirmative." He dreaded the thought. Technically there was no difference between uploading surveillance into his home console and doing it at the office, but concentration was more difficult at Command. It was noisier, full of scheming Decepticons, and had no Jazz.

"Can I come?"

"Negative."

Jazz didn't make any kind of protest, but the silence that settled over the balcony was worse. If he looked, he wondered if he would see Jazz trying to hide his disappointment behind more gymnastics on the rail.

"However, shorter shift at Headquarters deemed adequate. Circumstances allowing, will return earlier for customary walk."

"Really?"

"Jazz requires new puzzle game. Also, black polish."

"Well, that's somethin', I guess."

Jazz dropped to straddle the rail and then rolled forward a couple of times, stopping near Soundwave's elbow. "You know, Soundwave, we can't last like this. Acid rain left less scarring on this house than we're managin' every night. At least the rain doesn't go on forever."

Soundwave wasn't sure what to say to that, so he only looked at Jazz in silence. "You're still mad at me, I know. I'm still mad at you. I possibly threatened your government and entire way of life, you raped my mind, these things *happen* in a relationship. At least, I assume they do. It's not as if I've ever been in one myself. I just hope that whatever this is we have to go through, it's over soon. I bet you do too."

He rolled off the balcony, carefully not brushing against Soundwave, and went inside to begin cleaning the walls.

Jazz and his polish, by Shibara-Draws-Mecha



## on the street

The next workshift was better, mostly because Soundwave stayed put in his office and didn't attempt to speak to anyone. He didn't bother Shockwave or Starscream, or spend any more time than he had to walking the halls, or, as the twins put it, 'frag off all Decepticons in the spirit of Jazz'. He avoided trouble by staying behind his desk and uploading the surveillance taken by Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, half an optic on the monitor screen that showed Jazz back at home. He finished in good time, drafted the report for Megatron, and left Headquarters without any fuss whatsoever.

"That's it?" Jazz complained, now trotting along beside him on their walk. "No fights? No confrontations? Not even a bicker or two with Starscream?"

"Negative. Workshift, uneventful."

"You mean boring. What's the point of going to HQ if you're not even going to talk to the other Decepticons?"

"Today, no meetings scheduled. When meetings scheduled, will attend."

"Does Megatron even know you went in today?"

"Megatron knows," Soundwave assured him. It wasn't even a matter of lingering long enough in the halls to be seen, and for the gossip to fly. Megatron had given an order, however phrased, and they both knew Soundwave followed Megatron's orders. After so many centuries, there was no question. Megatron commanded, and Soundwave obeyed.

"Well it still sounds like a boring waste of time to me. Take me with you tomorrow? Starscream won't know what hit him."

"Negative."

Jazz huffed, and they fell into an unhappy silence. Soundwave knew how frustrated and bored Jazz had been, to be locked up alone at home for almost the entire cycle, and he'd hoped his early return and this walk would cure that. Evidently not. He was either just that bored or just that eager to return to a building full of Decepticon officers and their sensitive data, and either way Soundwave was still going to say no. How long before Jazz accepted that?

"Soundwave."

"Jazz, argument ineffecti-"

"No, *Soundwave*." Jazz grabbed his wrist, squeezing hard enough to grab his attention, but he wasn't looking at his master. He was looking at the street winding before them, their usual haunt, its walks teeming with stalls and vendors and their goods for sale. At this time of the cycle it was usually bursting with the noise of haggling mecha, a flurry of cheap commerce and frivolous entertainment. It was still noisy but something was different about the sound today, Soundwave could already detect the differences in pitch and tone. Enforcers hovered around the edge with weapons primed, and merchants shivered behind their stalls. "Something's wrong."

Jazz let go, and before Soundwave could think to grab his arm, he was already gone. Soundwave didn't lower himself to go running after him, but he stepped up to a brisk stride, tailing Jazz into the chaotic marketplace. The crowd was in an uproar divided between terror and anger, some of them shouting, some of them pleading. The begging of one merchant was to no avail, and Soundwave

watched a couple of civilians tip his stall over. Canisters of soap crashed and shattered on the street.

"What are you doing?" Jazz wailed, and a mech consulting his datapad threw him an irritated look.

"Don't presume to ask me any questions, Autobot slave. And shouldn't you be with your master?"

"Master present," Soundwave answered, drawing closer. "Query repeated: explain actions."

"Director Soundwave, sir." The mech looked up and straightened, but his tone didn't get any friendlier. "The premier did mention you may be present today when we conduct our surprise inspection. He expressed a wish to thank you for advising him that so many street merchants were operating without permits. We've already uncovered several, a substantial percentage of them on this street alone. I head his subcommittee on small business regulation."

"I think you mean small business destruction," Jazz pointed out acidly, watching the soap pool out from underneath shattered glass.

The mech ignored Jazz. "If you will excuse me, sir, I still have many inspections to carry out. Those merchants with a proper permit registration number have nothing to fear, and will still be available if you came here today to conduct business with them."

"We came here to get some black polish from our favorite vendor." Jazz's engine was snarling dangerously. "And I don't see him. Did you toss him into the gutters after his stock?"

This time the mech couldn't resist answering Jazz, glancing at him sideways with a smirk. "They are only trash, after all."

Jazz's engine revved again, more loudly. "Stuck-up worthless cog - hey! Hey, don't touch that!" The committee had already moved on to the next stall, one of them shoving the merchant back while the other dumped a boxful of music data cards on the ground. "Stop that, that's Hendrix! Respect the classics!"

This time Soundwave moved fast enough, and hauled Jazz back up against his own body before he could attack the nearest bureaucrat. Jazz squirmed in his grasp. "Stop that, let me go!"

"Jazz -"

"What did *you do*?" Jazz snaked out from under his arm but couldn't dislodge Soundwave's grip on his wrist. "You went to Shockwave yesterday, what did you tell him? Is this because of you?"

"Only discussed possibility of -"

"Of more sitting targets out here, waiting to be knocked over by him and his pathetic middle managers!" The subcommittee head looked over at Jazz with a scowl, but didn't speak. "How could you, Soundwave? Look at what you've done." He cringed at the sound of data cards being crunched under a heavy pede.

"This consequence, not intentional," Soundwave tried to explain. "Address of enforcer corruption, only objective."

"Good job." With his free hand Jazz grasped Soundwave's chin and turned his head aside, forcing him to look at a vendor down on his knees. His face was buried in his hands as the remnants of his merchandise pooled around him, now tainted black from the filth of the street. "Things are getting better already."

"Enough." Soundwave pushed away Jazz's hand. "Results unfortunate, but in process. Presently unable to affect outcome."

"What? No, you can't just wash your hands of everything now, you started this mess! Now you have to fix it."

"Execution of empire law, not my jurisdiction."

"Come on, Soundwave, don't give me that. These mecha need you; they *trust* you. You're here almost every day, spending credits, paying their prices, treating them fairly. Do you know how rare that is for a Decepticon? If you don't speak up for them, who will?"

Again Soundwave glanced at the crowd, most of whom were still shouting angrily at the committee members. A few were gazing hopefully at him, as if expecting him to simply order the bureaucrats away and make everything right again. They didn't understand the delicate balance between the top Decepticon officers, the power games, the hostility and distrust. They just saw one of their leaders.

"This is where the twins buy their video games," Jazz added. "And Laserbeak, she loves this place. Are you going to let them take it away from her? Are you going to let them take it away from *us*? Think about all the good times we've had here."

Soundwave's recollections of this place mostly involved headaches, particularly when Jazz thought it was a good idea to do cartwheels up on the walls. But Jazz, at least, seemed to enjoy their time here.

"This jurisdiction, Shockwave's. Jazz knows this."

"Then we'll go find him and you can talk to him. Butter him up, tell him Megatron likes him better than you, do whatever it takes. If you could get him to back off, it would mean everything to these mecha. You have to at least try."

"Jazz's persistence, surprising. Previous understanding, Jazz desires empire to become more unpopular."

"That was before they stomped all over Jimi Hendrix. There are things in this life you just don't *do*."

Vaguely, Soundwave noticed a sigh escaping his own vents. Must Jazz argue in such a... Jazz-like way? Soundwave had very little hope of talking any sense into Shockwave, but he was right that Soundwave had triggered this ridiculous raid. He had a responsibility to at least try and rectify it. That Jazz was so distressed was, he told himself, merely a small factor in his decision.

*Transmission sent - target frequency located - Premier Shockwave successfully hailed - transmission signal accepted.*

*"Director Soundwave. Did you need something?"*

*"State location. Discussion, required."*

---

They found him three blocks away, apparently on a walking tour of his many raids - an inspection

on the inspections. Soundwave watched one of his underlings scurry up to him and deliver some kind of report, then bow deeply and return to the lines of stalls again. To see Shockwave out in the city was such a peculiar sight that, at first, that was all Soundwave noticed. Later he would regret not paying better attention to the other details, and herding Jazz away before the trouble even started. Instead, he merely turned to Jazz for a cautionary reminder.

"Jazz, your silence expected. Rational discussion with Shockwave, more likely without taunts."

"Quiet as a glitchmouse," Jazz promised, and clapped both hands over his mouth. He added a muffled, "Go get 'em."

They started walking again. Jazz didn't even make it all the way to their target. Five steps closer, he flinched and almost jumped right onto Soundwave. "Oh Primus," he gasped. For the second time that day his hand closed around Soundwave's arm and squeezed. "She's here."

Soundwave saw her in the next second, and his first instinct was to flinch too. It was not the first time Soundwave had seen Chromia since her enslavement, but Shockwave rarely allowed her outside his home and it had been some years since. She looked worse than he remembered. It wasn't that she bore dents like Bluestreak or Groove, and she didn't slouch in timid misery like Perceptor. Chromia stood straight and tall, a lithe figure compared to Shockwave's ungainly bulk. When he moved, she moved at the exact same pace; when he stopped, she stopped in the same moment, always right on the edge of his shadow. She wasn't even looking at him while she managed this, gazing face forward at nothing in particular. At a closer distance, Soundwave would be able to see the thin, unhealed welts of a whip crisscrossing her body in perfect symmetry.

Some kind of horrified whine scraped itself out of Jazz's vocalizer, and Soundwave rested a hand on his shoulder. If he could have he would have left at that moment, never mind anything else, but it was too late. Shockwave closed the last of the distance between them, gaze fixed on Soundwave appraisingly.

"Greetings, Director Soundwave. Your request for a meeting seemed quite urgent, I do hope nothing is wrong. However, let me first thank you personally for your quite accurate estimate that too many street merchants had not properly registered with my agency. We've already uncovered several dozen of the scofflaws, and will be collecting some substantial fines from them."

Chromia hovered just behind him, perfectly still, unfocused optics looking straight through both Soundwave and Jazz as if they weren't even there. With effort Soundwave dragged his attention back to Shockwave.

"Gratitude, unnecessary and unwelcome. Your committee's reaction, unintended."

"Oh?" Shockwave tilted his head to the side by a few degrees. "You brought the problem of widespread illegal vending to me. Did you not expect me to take steps?"

"My greater concern, problem with law enforcement corruption."

"You mean taking bribes in exchange for ignoring lack of permits. Well that should no longer be an issue, now that the criminals have been swept from the streets. I would have thought you'd be pleased."

Soundwave cycled air through his vents, considering his response. He must flatter Shockwave, or this conviction to law enforcement, well known. Your swift response, admirable."

"Thank you."



"However, consequences perhaps too severe. These merchants, substantial portion of Iacon's economy."

"They are free to return to the streets once they've settled their fines and purchased a permit."

"Expense, likely very high."

"Then perhaps it's time they forgot about those dirty, pathetic little stands," Shockwave said tersely. "They have no right to them. It isn't as if there aren't other ways to earn a living in this city. My subcommittee on industrial development is granting generous subsidies to new factories, all of whom require workers."

"Drones, usually sufficient for factory work."

"In the past, yes. But drone production itself is still too low to satisfy demand, and the gap must be filled. Assembly work is good enough for that greasy rabble." He spared a disdainful glance at the unhappy crowds. "I can't stand the sight of them anyway. I hate the way they fill the streets with their filth and noise, hawking their ridiculous Earth trinkets. It's raucous and disorganized. Cutting it down by half is a good start, I'd say."

"That merchandise, highly prized by many mecha. Including Decepticons."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that, Soundwave. One way or another, goods can be sold. Preferably in clean, indoors environments. Fewer merchants with larger, dignified shops is preferable, don't you think?"

Larger, dignified shops that could only be started by Shockwave's wealthier associates, no doubt. The larger plan was becoming painfully apparent to Soundwave with every word, as was the understanding that there would be no persuading Shockwave today. He did not care about the market, he did not care about the merchants. And he most certainly did not care about where Rumble and Frenzy would now be buying their games.

"What are you doing, slave?" Shockwave barked, startling him. Jazz jumped back from Chromia as if he'd been burned, hastily crossing his arms tightly against his chest.

"I didn't touch her!" he said quickly. "I didn't. I was only trying to say hello, I *didn't touch her*." Nervous fear crackled around Jazz like an electric field, every strut tensed.

"Say hello?" Shockwave repeated coldly. "How dare you come so close to my property, slave; I thought you'd learned your lesson the last time. I made certain that she did." The smug hint in Shockwave's voice was enough to make Jazz's engine growl, but he clamped his mouth shut rather than retort.

"You see, Soundwave, I've always felt that inferior beings actually prefer an environment in which they're told what to do." Idly he raised a clawtip to hover just in front of Chromia's face, then glided it to the right. Automatically Chromia's head turned to follow it. "One only needs to make the alternative painful enough. But when they accept that their place is to follow orders..." Again her head turned, tracking his clawtip to the left, then up, then down. "They become peaceful, compliant, and better subjects for the empire. It's better for all of us if most of the population works for just a handful of employers, rather than this hodgepodge of entrepreneurialism. Give it some thought, and I'm sure you'll agree."

The spectacle was rather horrifying, and Soundwave could hear Jazz's systems running at high pitch. "Demonstration, unnecessary."

"You are not amused? Megatron finds my slave's performances to be quite entertaining."

"Sick freak," Jazz said softly. Shockwave's optic shifted towards him.

"Repeat that, slave."

"I said: 'sick freak'. Isn't it enough for you that you hold this whole city in your filthy hand? Do you have to show off on her too?"

That lone optic darkened. "You will refrain from disrespect, Autobot slave. How I deal with my property is not your concern."

"Your property," Jazz echoed venomously. "Right. You must be so grateful to Megatron for giving you one of Elita's contingent, Primus knows you couldn't catch any of them on your own. Ooh, that must be embarrassing. An army of war drones and you still couldn't outwit a half dozen female Autobots. It's okay - the Seekers don't ever laugh about that."

Claws rippled menacingly, itching to reach out and strike Jazz. Soundwave noticed that a few of Shockwave's subordinates were close enough to hear, looking torn whether to stay and enjoy more, or back away and pretend they heard nothing at all.

"A follower of the fallen Prime, I should think, is in no place to comment on others' prowess in battle."

"Least he was sometimes on the battlefield."

"Insolent little slave." Shockwave leaned just a little closer to Jazz, putting his vast size to good advantage. "You wear that collar and chain because your army was inferior to the Decepticons, because your leader was inferior to Megatron's greater strength and cunning. Learn your place, or I will teach it to you."

"Well look who knows how to be intimidating as long as his prey's already tied up. I'd say pick on someone your own size, but..." Pointedly Jazz swept his gaze over Shockwave's famously bulky frame. "I suppose there is no such creature."

Shockwave hissed, optic smoldering with fury, and his hand dove into subspace. "Get on your knees, Autobot, and I will show you what I do to slaves of *your* size."

The hand came back out bearing a vicious acid whip, but he didn't have much of a chance to even brandish it at Jazz before Soundwave's hand clamped down over his wrist and held it fast.

"Stop. Now."

"Your slave requires discipline, Director Soundwave," Shockwave said smoothly. "I should think that much is obvious. If you prefer to administer it yourself I will lend you my training device, but I do insist on watching."

Soundwave tightened his grip and had the satisfaction of seeing Shockwave wince. "Jazz, mine. His discipline my concern, not yours. Your place to insist *anything* of me, nonexistent."

Soundwave was physically stronger than Shockwave and they both knew it. Now, in front of all his watching subordinates, he had no choice but to back down. Expression or not, Soundwave knew he was seething with fury.

"I will take this to Megatron."

"Do. This conversation, recorded. If commanded, will provide Megatron with full reproduction of slave's remarks. Starscream also."

Shockwave stiffened for a new reason, optic momentarily blanching. Soundwave released his grip, and he jerked back his arm. "Just get out of my sight."

Soundwave inclined his head in a show of false propriety, then tugged on Jazz's arm. "I'm sorry," Jazz was trying to tell Chromia. "I'm so sorry, please blink if you hear me..." He didn't resist Soundwave's pull, but he wouldn't look away even as Soundwave dragged him away. "I'm sorry!"

Soundwave just so happened to be looking at Chromia when he thought he saw something flicker in her optics, but it was too fast to tell and most of his attention was on Jazz. Long strides carried him away as fast as they could, and he did not look back. He had a feeling that Jazz did.

---

Jazz stayed three fast steps ahead of him the whole way home, shoulders hunched and ominously quiet. Soundwave didn't know what to say, if anything could be said, and his two attempts to rest a hand on Jazz's shoulder were shrugged off. They covered the entire distance back to his home in dreadful silence, and Jazz wouldn't look at him once. Even when they returned to the building Jazz refused to slow down, rapidly punching the keypad by the door and diving through the second it opened.

"That entry code, arranged only yesterday."

"I solved it already. You're gonna have to change it every day, you should know that." Jazz stomped into the lift and Soundwave barely made it in time before the door was sliding shut.

"Jazz, your frustration understood -"

"Oh I doubt that. I doubt that very much."

"Shockwave's actions... extreme. However, also the exception."

"So that makes it okay? Doesn't really count? Sorry, Chromia, that you have to live in the Pit with the one-eyed devil himself, but at least what he does to you isn't normal? Look me in the optic, Soundwave, and tell me you wouldn't tear the limbs off *anyone* that did the same to your cassettes."

Soundwave faltered just long enough for Jazz to escape the elevator and enter the loft. "Symbiotes, mine. Jazz, mine. Autobot Chromia, now Shockwave's."

Jazz stopped so short that Soundwave almost walked into him, and whipped around. The light in his visor was like ice. "And that is why you do not understand. The Autobots are different. We don't have to be symbiotic or from the same factory or even the same model type to care about one another, or to get angry when one of our own is being slowly tortured to death. Well just because you won't get angry doesn't mean I can't. I want to light that mech on fire, Soundwave. Someday I will watch him burn."

"Jazz will refrain from threats against Decepticons."

"Why do you defend the sociopaths?" Jazz shouted. "You're not one of them!"

He spun around and stormed into Soundwave's personal berth chamber, and slammed the door shut behind him. This time, Soundwave did not follow.

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It was near Jazz's next feeding time when Rumble and Frenzy returned later that cycle, both loudly wailing that their favorite vid chip dispenser's stall had been wrecked. Jazz still hadn't come out of his berth chamber, leaving Soundwave alone in the common room with an untouched, increasingly dusty hax set. They hadn't played since the day the Combaticons stole Hound.

"... and so where the hell are we supposed to get the next Assassin's Creed now, that's what I'd like to know. Hey, are you even listening? Boss!" Frenzy had to kick him in the pede in order to draw Soundave's attention, scowling impatiently. "Everyone's saying that it's Shockwave who made it happen, that slagheap. Can't you go talk to him? We need access to the good games!"

"Discussion with Shockwave, already attempted today. Discussion unsuccessful. Shockwave's reasons for his actions, numerous."

"Frag." He sat on Soundwave's pede with a huff. "I need cheering up. Where's Jazz?"

"Jazz, in berth chamber."

"Why?" asked Rumble, morosely cuddling his video game controller. "Is he sick?"

"Encounter with Shockwave, upsetting." Soundwave hesitated. "Shockwave, accompanied by Autobot slave."

"Wh- ohhh." The twins exchanged a look. In theory, Shockwave was lowest on Megatron's list of Decepticons to monitor, and none of Soundwave's cassettes were assigned to spy on his estate. In practice, they and everyone else on the planet knew what kinds of things Shockwave did to his slave every night. "Yech. That shit is just plain creepy. What's wrong with that mech, anyway?"

"I say he's still a little touched in the head from getting left behind for all those vorns. He was so lonely for Megatron." They snickered.

"So why aren't you in there with Jazz?"

"Jazz, requires time alone."

"Thought Jazz hated being alone. Made that point with the polish yesterday."

Soundwave didn't think that was quite right, but both of them were staring in that expectant way of theirs, and anyway Jazz must be fed. Putting aside trepidation, he stood and returned to his chamber. Inside, the lights were off, and only the window gave any illumination. Jazz was curled up on his side of the berth, facing the wall, utterly still. Anyone else might assume he was asleep, but Soundwave was too familiar with Jazz's ventilation patterns to be fooled. He shut the door behind him and sat on the berth.

"Go away," Jazz muttered. "I don't want to talk to any Decepticons."

"Jazz must refuel. Open mouth."

"Lost my appetite."

"Argument, useless."

Soundwave leaned over Jazz's body and inserted into his mouth the energon treat, which was grudgingly accepted and swallowed. "Okay, you've ensured another joor's worth of my codependency. You can go now."

Soundwave did not. "Jazz, deliberately antagonized Shockwave. Actions unwise."

"Unwise, yes," Jazz sighed. "But not deliberate. I didn't mean for it to go so far. I know she's paying for it right now, and saying sorry a thousand times wouldn't be enough. Even if I thought she could hear me."

"Temper, lost?"

"Yeah."

"Unusual."

"I couldn't stop myself. I saw him there on the street with her... *displaying* her, and it made me so angry. There's a reason he brought her out today; for him it wasn't enough to set his minions loose on the city and destroy a lot of livelihoods. He had to show off the results of his more personal cruelty too, just to scare them all senseless. He's so proud of his handiwork."

"Initiating contact, your mistake."

"What, are you mad? It's not as if you have anything to be nervous about, not on Chromia's count. I wasn't going to touch her, I wasn't even trying to talk to her. I was just... I had to find out if she was still alive in there. Because I'm not so sure. I don't see her very often, and the last time -" He shuddered. "That didn't end well. I think Shockwave is killing her from the inside out, and I can't do anything to stop it."

He looked so small and forlorn, huddled against his edge of the berth. Soundwave obeyed the urge to rub a hand lightly along his arm, and Jazz shrank away from his touch.

"Shockwave, harrassed and robbed by Elita's troop frequently, for many vorns. Speculation: Shockwave's actions a form of retaliation."

"I wish that was all of it. If it was just about the revenge, maybe I wouldn't be so scared. If it was about the revenge, he'd make sure to keep her sane enough to understand what he was doing. But it's not about that anymore, it's about Megatron."

"Explain."

"Shockwave would give anything, down to his last optic, to get into that berth and we all know it. But he's a little too wide and too ugly to be Megatron's type, and we all know that too. So instead he uses his lovely bot like a lure for Megatron's attentions, so he can *watch* and fantasize and pretend that it's him for a night. I don't know if it's pathetic or horrifying, but I wish you cons would leave us out of your fucked up triangles. The Autobots have got enough to deal with."

Soundwave withdrew his hand, taken aback. Everyone knew about Shockwave's feelings, of course, but he hadn't paid much attention to Megatron's late-night visits to his estate or their increasing frequency. Jazz's rage was suddenly more understandable.

"Your advice taken, when analyzing surveillance," he said, after a short silence. "Conducting cross-reference searches for complaints against government policies; results numerous. Most frequently targeted policies, Shockwave's. Name, never mentioned for fear of arrest, but identity clear enough."

For the first time Jazz shifted, tilting his head back just a little towards Soundwave. "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"Negative; lying unnecessary, never practiced."

"Yeah, yeah. So, they're really starting to get angry? Even before today?"

"Affirmative. High taxes, frequent cause of complaint. Faulty infrastructure and shortage of housing, also."

"And they know it's Shockwave's fault?"

"In most conversations, strongly implied."

"Is it enough to take to Megatron?"

"Negative. Name, never mentioned. Civilian complaints for policies, no concern to Megatron."

"Got his hands full with other things," Jazz muttered. "Still, it's somethin'." Finally he rolled onto his back, and fixed Soundwave with a thoughtful gaze. "You stopped him, today, when he was ready to go at me with that stupid whip. You shouldn't have, you know. You might have been able to salvage something from the meeting if you'd let him satisfy his pride."

"Shockwave's actions, unacceptable. Jazz, mine. My property, always under my protection."

"You could say I did provoke him. Most would."

"Irrelevant. Comments very disrespectful, but Jazz still mine."

"You could have stopped me."

That gave Soundwave pause for thought. Yes, Jazz was right, he could have stopped him. Once that mouth opened, it wasn't as if Soundwave didn't know what was coming. "Personal assessment: Shockwave's policies illogical, his actions cruel. Shockwave, deserved everything Jazz could say."

A corner of Jazz's mouth quirked up. "I'll be damned. Are you recording this conversation?"

"Negative."

"Just as well. Wouldn't want to blow anyone's neural fuses." Jazz lifted a hand, and idly stroked the edge of Soundwave's arm plating. "I do believe, my love, that we have almost made up."

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## on confrontation

Starscream didn't waste time. He was already at Soundwave's office by the time Soundwave arrived, lounging against it as if he'd just so happened to feel a little weak and only this exact door in all the building would do. This was exactly why he never wanted to make a regular habit of working here, Soundwave thought, and held back a tiny sigh. Starscream arched coyly against his door, wing flaps almost fluttering with delight.

"Good morning, Soundwave! Recharge well?"

"Starscream, move."

"I recharged well," Starscream purred, apparently not having heard him. "Maybe it's because I heard a wonderful story just before hitting the berth. It involved you, come to think of it. The story goes that you - *Soundwave* - confronted Shockwave in the midst of his ridiculous permit raid yesterday, and actually argued against it. Then after you let your razor-tongued slave have a go at him, you knocked him back on his aft while half of Iacon watched. I'm the first one to admit these rumors can get out of hand, so I've come straight to the source to hear it for myself. Do tell, Soundwave, because I know how you never lie: what happened yesterday? Tell me just half of all that is true, and I'll buy you a cube of high grade myself."

"Starscream, not owed any explanation."

"Then I suppose I have no choice but to assume it's all true." Starscream smirked, wings flicking as he shrugged. "I must say, Jazz is a lot more fun when you point him at somebody else. But I wonder if it was wise to leave your secret weapon at home; Shockwave is *not* happy with you. And I thought I could make him mad. I'm almost jealous of all the attention you're suddenly getting, because I'm quite sure I never managed to get his entire department buzzing with preparation like they're doing now. Urgent reports being prepared, secretive meetings... what's going on over there, I wonder? Are you nervous yet?"

"Negative."

"You should be. I warned you, Soundwave, that it was a bad idea to step into our ring and play politics. You're too honest and too logical to even know how, for one thing, and for another, Shockwave doesn't just play. Whatever it is that he's planning, you won't even have time to look up before it's already gone through the spark casing. Shockwave can't shoot worth scrap, but I'll give it to him, on *this* battlefield he knows how to aim."

"Starscream, still blocking my office."

Starscream pursed up his lips in his prettiest pout. "Aren't you going to ask for my help? You know that I hate you both, but I hate him so much more. Whatever he's trying, it's not like I want him to win."

"Your assistance, not needed. Not wanted."

"Hmph, fine. Now that I think about it, you're not quite the Soundwave I used to know and loathe anyway. Something's different about you; you're starting to care about more than just your little pests and your unending surveillance. If you're willing to pick fights with Shockwave over something as absurd as those silly markets, then who knows what you're capable of? I'll just sit back and see who carries the day. May the best Con win."

At last he peeled himself off Soundwave's door and departed, though not without a sassy rap of the knuckle against Soundwave's chest glass. Soundwave swallowed a groan and entered his office, automatically checking on the monitor for Jazz as he unlocked his console. Nothing written on the floor today, at least. They never did get more polish, or a new puzzle game for Jazz's datapad, and so Soundwave had left behind the younger twins to amuse him and make sure he didn't do anything like take apart the building. Now he was brushing Buzzsaw's wings, but kept glancing at the camera every few seconds as if distracted. Something in his posture struck Soundwave as being a little worried.

*"Rumble, Frenzy, report to office now."*

*"But we're on duty in the command -"*

*"Now."*

*"Yes, boss."* Soundwave was not in the habit of letting Starscream scare him about anything, but the tension in Jazz's body was a different story. When Soundwave left their home, he was muttering things about Soundwave watching his back for a slightly ill-aimed knife. Naturally Shockwave would be seeking revenge for what happened yesterday, but the spark echo from all symbiotes was safe and untroubled. He'd only just left home, and according to the video feed all was still fine. What was Shockwave up to? Jazz would not be nervous without reason. If he were here, would he have any ideas?

Irrelevant. Soundwave turned his back on the monitors when Rumble and Frenzy entered the room.

"Boss, what's goin' on?"

"Yeah, you're feeling kinda wound-up."

"Report all unusual activity exhibited by Shockwave's subordinates this shift."

"Whoa, how did you even know already?" They looked awed. "We were gonna include it in the upload tonight, but we didn't figure it was an emergency -"

"Report, now."

They shrugged in perfect unison. "Nothing's happened, really. We just heard mecha sayin' they've been ordered to meetings with Shockwave, meetings that we don't think were on the schedule yesterday. Closed doors; his departments only. Do you think it's trouble?"

Soundwave hesitated, wondering if it was worthwhile or paranoid to call Laserbeak down and have her infiltrate Shockwave's offices. He was rapidly formulating probabilities when his console comm flickered to life.

"Speaking of trouble," Rumble muttered, when Shockwave's image lit up the screen.

"Director Soundwave, so you've finally arrived. Barely in time, I note, but still arrived."

"Just because *you* live at your desk -" Frenzy started indignantly, but shut his mouth when Soundwave held up a hand.

"General meeting, not scheduled today. Explain 'in time'."

"Oh, didn't you receive my memo? I've scheduled a brief conference with Megatron and, at his



suggestion, invited you to participate. It's quite dry and shouldn't take up too much of your precious time; hopefully we'll be done quickly. I'll be presenting the reasons for which your Surveillance and Intelligence department should now come under my jurisdiction."

"What?" spluttered Frenzy.

"Soundwave answers to Megatron," Rumble said furiously, "not you, you -"

"Rumble," Soundwave warned sharply, "*Frenzy. Silence, now.*" Aloud he addressed Shockwave with a voice glacially calm. "Shockwave, not experienced in communications or surveillance. Transfer of jurisdiction, illogical."

"You can say that to Lord Megatron, if you like," Shockwave answered, doing his best to cover his vindictive glee with casual boredom. "Illogical breaches of jurisdiction certainly wasn't bothering you any when you walked into *my* enforcement division, and took it upon yourself to initiate a punishment on two of *my* lawkeepers."

"That action, taken at Shockwave's recommend-"

"I must cut this short, I'm afraid, Megatron's expecting me now in the command room. See you in one breem, Director Soundwave."

The comm screen went black and his symbiotes, quivering with the effort of keeping hands slapped over their own mouths, burst into noise. "Soundwave, you can't let him do this!"

"We can't work for that slagsucking prick!"

"*You* can't work for that slagsucking prick, you're better than him! You were Megatron's third on the frontlines while he was here in Iacon swilling high grade. You shouldn't have to report to anyone but Megatron himself!"

"Shouting unnecessary," Soundwave reminded them, much more coolly than he felt inside. "Decisions for jurisdiction of power, Megatron's alone."

"But you'll fight it, won't you?"

"Argument, intended. Formulating counterpoints now." His mind was busy scanning and sorting already, filing logical defenses against Shockwave's claim, but he had so little time. So this was what Shockwave had spent all the morning preparing.

Rumble and Frenzy both glanced at the monitors, then exchanged a look. "Maybe... we should run home and get Jazz."

What? "Negative, unnecessary."

"But, Jazz is good at this kind of stuff."

"Yeah, he can help! He always does."

"Four breems, tops, we can fly there and -"

"Jazz, not needed," Soundwave snapped, rising from his chair. "Soundwave, competent and capable of defending authority against Shockwave. Assistance of slave not required."

They didn't protest anymore, at least not out loud, but their frustration and anxiety read plainly enough. "Now, attending meeting. Your attendance, not suggested; panicking symbiotes a

significant distraction. Dismissed."

The door swished open and he stepped forward, resolutely not looking anywhere at all near the monitor screens. He walked past the twins without looking at them either. And when the door slipped shut behind him, he carefully looked nowhere but the opposite wall as he began cycling deep, nervous ventilations.

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Soundwave did not hurry. The last thing Megatron needed to see was his comms officer rushing flustered into the command room, so Soundwave keyed open the door and entered the room at his usual deliberate stride. He walked past slaves, and civilians, and underlings, up the steps past two levels of clearance, all without so much as a glance to either side. Megatron was already there, lounging in his massive chair, as was Shockwave, standing primly by the holodisplay table. Starscream looked oddly out of place on the sidelines, over by the consoles, more watchful today than smug. Shockwave would be the one wearing the smirk, if he was capable of expressions. As it was, his optic brightened a few shades with anticipation when Soundwave stepped on to the top level.

"Ah, Director Soundwave, welcome. Punctual as always."

*"You will not win this,"* Soundwave said by way of reply, effortlessly hacking straight into Shockwave's personal comm frequency. Shockwave flinched, just briefly enough that no one else noticed.

"Alright, Shockwave," Megatron spoke up, looking dangerously on the brink between bored and curious, "you've got your five breems. Make your case already."

"By your leave, my lord." Shockwave bowed and flicked a switch on the table. Detailed graphs with long lists of numbers, far longer than Megatron would ever bother to read, promptly popped up. "What you see before you are the case numbers of criminal incidents since the founding of our new law enforcement department. As my lord Megatron knows, I subsequently delegated management of the department to Decepticons Blitzwing and Astrotrain. They inform me that access to Soundwave's surveillance data would be tremendously helpful in the course of investigations; to date, Soundwave has never offered such access. He has, however, seen fit to involve himself in enforcement affairs. The natural conclusion to make is that Soundwave and law enforcement ought to be consolidated under the same authority."

"In other words, yourself."

"Precisely, my lord. I have here –"

"But Shockwave, you don't have any expertise in Soundwave's specialties." Megatron's optics narrowed thoughtfully. "Do you really think yourself capable of overseeing tasks like datastream hacking and signal analysis?"

"My lord, I have absolutely no intention of attempting to supplant Soundwave's responsibilities. We all know here that his expertise is irreplaceable. I merely propose that he report to me his findings. When we include Surveillance and Intelligence in my jurisdiction, I can ensure full interdepartmental cooperation between Soundwave and the triplechangers. Here is a very rough estimate of the efficiency my underlings believe we could gain from this merger." More charts flipped past very

quickly. “Substantial joors of your time alone would be saved, as I am aware you make it a daily practice to read Soundwave’s reports personally. I would only be too happy to take such a responsibility off your hands.”

At that prospect Megatron looked intrigued, but heavy skepticism still lurked. “And this new idea of yours has absolutely nothing at all do with that little... altercation yesterday that I’ve been hearing about?” He glanced briefly at Starscream, who preened when Shockwave shot him a nasty glare.

“On the contrary, my lord. Although it’s true our exchange was... heated, Soundwave’s sudden interest in how I conduct the execution of your laws is the most telling argument that he should be more involved with my own departments. I am not interested in becoming his *boss*; I look forward to a productive and mutually beneficial partnership.”

“I see.” For the first time Megatron looked at Soundwave. “He makes an interesting argument, Soundwave. Is it true you've never offered access to your own surveillance data for lawkeeping investigations?”

"Affirmative."

Shockwave twitched again, surprised Soundwave hadn't tried to dance around that fact.

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Data, never requested."

“You haven’t exactly made it easy to ask, have you?” Shockwave pointed out quickly. “As an officer in this government you are notoriously solitary and unapproachable, particularly given your curious habit of seclusion. You insist on working alone, making use only of your symbiotes for assistants, and most days cannot even be found in Decepticon Headquarters. You live and work in a manner so... *independent* of the rest of us.” He pronounced the word as though it were foul to taste. “It’s no wonder that nobody can find any kind of cooperation with you at all.”

“Solitude, sought for purpose of concentration. Exclusive reliance on symbiotes, due to sensitive data. Work habits, perhaps peculiar, but effective. Work habits of your law enforcement personnel, more questionable.”

He felt rather than saw the optic ridges of both Megatron and Starscream go up. “And what,” Shockwave asked frostily, “is that supposed to mean?”

“Explanation inferior to demonstration. Starscream, contact enforcement department, head office.”

Starscream, looking too gleeful to even be bothered that he’d been ordered to the task, reached to jab the appropriate button on the console. “Wait –” Shockwave tried, but it was too late. The comm screen lit up with a vivid, overlarge image of Blitzwing at his desk, pedes propped up, optics shuttered, fast asleep.

Starscream muffled a giggle into his hand while everyone else stared in silence. Shockwave’s systems coughed with delicate embarrassment. “Well I’m quite sure that Astrotrain –”

Starscream tried the other desk without even needing to be asked, only to find it completely empty. If Soundwave had had any time to prepare, he would have sent Laserbeak in to record a full day’s worth of the little Autobot busily managing the office while these two did anything but. This was enough, he decided, especially when he saw the look on Megatron’s face.

“Observation,” he said into the awkward quiet. “Shockwave oversees many departments. Currently has jurisdiction over taxation, acid sewage infrastructure, housing regulation, power grid registration, scavenging permits...” Rapidly Soundwave pulled snatches of conversations and overheard complaints from the last surveillance report, assembling them into data packets and firing them straight into Shockwave’s personal frequency. “Demolition.” - *they destroyed our home* – “Industrial development.” - *gives our credits to his friends to start more factories* – “And, significantly, small business regulation.” - *that table was everything I had, now I've no choice but to beg for my fuel!*

That optic kept getting paler and paler as Soundwave's list got longer, and at last Soundwave received a slightly frantic hail for contact. Deliberately he made Shockwave wait before accepting it.

*"Do you think you can blackmail me with that pathetic whining?"* he snarled. *"Megatron doesn't care about those worthless peasants and we both know it."*

*"This known. However, offer to read daily surveillance reports, in conjunction with these recordings, may give impression of suspicious motive. Starscream will assume so; Megatron might. Shockwave, willing to gamble?"*

Soundwave returned his gaze to Megatron, concluding his spoken litany of Shockwave's departments at the same time he cut the transmission, not giving him a chance to reply. "Shockwave's responsibilities numerous. Perhaps too numerous to allow effective supervision of each department. Suggestion: Shockwave concentrate on current responsibilities before seeking new ones. Regardless, proposal to manage my department unsuitable. Shockwave's habits clearly show preference for control over those with less intelligence. Even if necessity dictates he beat all intelligence out of them first."

Silence thudded into the command room. Shockwave's systems froze, Megatron's optics shuttered and reset themselves, and Starscream's jaw swung open in the most astonished gape Soundwave had ever seen on him. Then, somewhere in that silence, some tiny noise attracted his attention and he glanced to the side. There on the ground floor stood Jazz, vents still wide open from the exertion of running, the four casseticons perched on or standing by him. All of them were staring up at him, stunned.

"Well," Megatron finally managed. "I must say, Soundwave, your defense is... forceful. And you make a sound argument." His words were punctuated by a gentle snore from Blitzwing. "Shockwave, do you have anything to add?"

Shockwave was rooted to the spot, looking as blankly helpless as anyone without a face possibly could. When a few too many seconds ticked by, Soundwave braced himself, ready to start listing to Megatron the recorded complaints, but it was not necessary. Shockwave had glimpsed his hand, and was ready to fold.

"No, my lord. I withdraw my proposal."

"That's good. To be truthful, I hadn't even realized what a workload of administration you were already carrying - that was quite a list. I think Soundwave's right, it would be wise to examine your own departments and ensure they're being run effectively before you go looking for more. By mecha that are awake, if possible."

Starscream barely managed to snort back his laughter, optics glittering with delight as he drank in Shockwave's utter humiliation. Shockwave bowed. "Of course, my lord."

"You have a lot to do then. Dismissed."

Megatron lifted his chin and his volume on that last word, effectively dismissing all of them, and Soundwave bowed as well. He turned toward the steps and was nearly trampled by Shockwave storming out, visibly seething. He was followed by Starscream, who leaned in close and whispered, "Nice show. I'll go for a week on this." Then Megatron, who said nothing at all, but something in the way he looked at Soundwave spoke volumes. He was impressed, yes, but also... taken aback. Soundwave hadn't seen that appraising look in his optics since they first met.

Jazz had made himself wisely scarce by the time Soundwave reached the lower floor, behind all the other officers. Following the feel of his symbiotes' tiny sparks, Soundwave left the command room and traveled the halls to his office, conscious of every pointed finger and whispered conversation in his wake. Then he entered his office and let the door shut behind him, and he was attacked. All four of his present casseticons set upon him at once, squawking and nipping at his joints or thumping him with triumphant fists.

"Holy scrap I never thought I'd see -"

"- couldn't believe my own audios -"

*"Shockwave, humiliated!"*

*"Master, enjoyed victory -"*

"- One-eye never saw it coming -"

"- sent him home with his tail between his legs!"

Jazz was standing in the center of the office, not even wearing his chains, vents still panting a little. "I didn't know what was going on," he said. "Laserbeak and Buzzsaw practically pushed me out the house. Then the twins caught up with us halfway here and- I ran as fast as I could. But I guess I didn't have to. You were fantastic. You made him so, so sorry that he'd started anything with you."

"Counterattack, not desired. Actions taken in defense only."

"But you didn't hold back. You not only knocked him to the floor, you pinned him there and went for the kill. That last thing you said, about... her, you didn't even have to."

"Perhaps. However, some part of counterattack a little desired. Vindication, enjoyed."

He couldn't quite tell what Jazz made of that, staring at him so strangely, and when he spoke again his voice was tight.

"Out."

What? "What?" Rumble asked, blankly.

"Out, now, all of you." Jazz shooed the aerial twins off Soundwave's shoulder and opened the office door, waving the baffled casseticons out into the hall, then unceremoniously tossed Rumble and Frenzy after them. Their startled yelps and protests were cut short when the soundproof door slid shut again. Jazz promptly turned around, with a gleam in his visor that Soundwave hadn't seen before.

"Now then. Poor master, you've had such a hard day at work, dodging power grabs, playing scary games... you should rest." Applying one finger of pressure against Soundwave's chest, Jazz backed Soundwave up to his own chair and pushed him down into it. "You must be so tired. Allow me to

help you *relax*."

Jazz breathed that last word directly into his audio sensor, before retreating just enough that Soundwave could see the wicked grin on his face. Jazz didn't straighten and step away, though, his knee joints melting beneath him until he was on the floor directly in front of Soundwave.

*"Donne-moi ta main."*

Wordlessly Soundwave complied, holding his right hand out to Jazz, who took it in both his smaller ones. As if he'd just been handed a fascinating treasure, Jazz cradled it tenderly, gliding his palms over every inch, tracing lines and joints with a gentle fingertip. Finally he turned Soundwave's palm toward himself, tilting it forward until a significant gap had opened up along Soundwave's wrist joint. Ever so delicately, Jazz reached one fingertip inside and ghosted it along a sensor wire.

Soundwave's systems accelerated sharply, and his internal temperature climbed two degrees. Jazz graced him with another sinister smile before tipping forward and replacing fingertip with glossa. The warm, moist tip merely touched the wire and Soundwave's spark jumped in his chest, excitement crackling throughout his body but especially along the most vulnerable lines. Of its own accord his armor loosened, relaxing itself for anticipated pleasure, and the wrist joint gap opened even further. Jazz made good use of the extra room, dancing and tickling his glossa along sensitive nerve wires, teasing them with an expert's touch. Soundwave's fans kicked on, spinning hard to combat his skyrocketing temperature, and even over their noise Soundwave could hear the air rushing in and out of his wide-open vents. In contrast Jazz looked perfectly cool and collected, toying lovingly with Soundwave's internals in what Soundwave had always *thought* was a fairly insensitive joint. He withdrew his mouth and blew lightly over the wires so recently moistened, and Soundwave almost jumped out of his chair.

Looking smug, Jazz tickled his fingertips over Soundwave's palm and returned his glossa to the wrist, pushing in harder, delving deeper, exciting Soundwave's systems into rotating even faster, generating friction, and unbearably delicious electricity. He could feel the fuel pumping furiously through his lines, generating increasing surges of energy that had nowhere to go. The electricity almost sang through the wires under Jazz's glossa, quivering with sensation. There was too much of it: the heat, the friction, the energy that sparked and flared with every new tickling touch. His left hand curled into a vicelike grip on the arm of his chair, tightening to the point of pain.

"Go on," Jazz murmured, and even the movement of his lips against Soundwave's outer metal was enough to make his plating buzz with pleasure. "You deserve it."

His body did not need the encouragement. A hot white flash erupted inside him and he overloaded, tiny sparks bursting from every joint. It was brilliant, sizzling bliss, pure ecstasy in those first few seconds for which even his optics had blacked out. Then his systems restarted themselves, his vision cleared, and he was left panting in its ebbing glow.

Jazz sat back on his heels, looking satisfied with himself. His vents weren't even completely open, but his visor was flushed bright blue. "Did I satisfy?"

"...affirmative."

"Good." He braced a hand on Soundwave's knee in preparation to stand, then paused. "You know, I think we should play hax tonight. I miss it."

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## on a lull

"Deep in my spark," Jazz confessed, "I'd kinda hoped this place would spring back to normal after what you did to Shockwave. I thought if we came back the next day, everything would be just like it was with all the vendors back to their usual places, selling their usual junk. It would have been nice, to know that nobody was permanently damaged by Shockwave's stupid power trip."

Soundwave followed his gaze to the walkways, still far less crowded than they'd once been, and less noisy. With less competition, the remaining merchants didn't have to shout or haggle nearly so much. Personally, Soundwave rather preferred this version, but he knew all his cassettes missed the excitement of what used to be.

"Shockwave's failed mission: capture and subjugation of my sovereignty and responsibilities. Connection to his current commands, nonexistent. His jurisdiction here unquestioned and uninterrupted."

"I know," Jazz sighed. "It's just so quiet, that's all. Too many voices missing." To the beat of some distant music he engaged a half-sparked step-skip, then lifted his head with a new thought. "But of course, they didn't just disappear, did they? Where did they go, Soundwave?"

"Query, not understood."

"Oh, I think you know what I mean. I spent too many vorns in the dark undersides of Iacon's economy to think that just because I can't see merchants hawking their scrap on the streets, doesn't mean they're not there. It's just a matter of knowing where to look. So where is it, Soundwave?" Playfully Jazz backed up before him, finger circling in the air once before tapping against his chest glass. "Where's the black market? I know it's out there, and I know you know where it is. There's no way your little spies have not found it."

As a matter of fact they had. Ravage had noted the new swell in commerce activity out on the fringe of the city, barely one cycle after Shockwave's surprise inspection raid, and it had been growing ever since.

"Location known," he acknowledged. "However, that information unnecessary for you."

"You won't tell me? Why not?"

"Jazz, likely to visit it?"

"Not as long as I'm on your leash, I guess. Can't go strolling into the illegal shopping district with Megatron's fourth at my elbow; imagine the panic. Sometimes I forget that you Decepticons represent law and order on this planet now."

Light rolled behind his visor and he resumed walking. Three steps later, he stopped again. "Wait, does this mean you're not telling anyone? Not even your boss?"

"Megatron's orders: conduct surveillance and report dissidence or treason. Detection of crime, not requested; that responsibility the jurisdiction of law enforcement. Surveillance data, never requested by law enforcement. Therefore, location of illegal business activity goes unreported."

"You scheming outlaw." Jazz looked fairly astonished, but an impressed grin was sliding across his face plates. "I don't know if you're doing it to piss off Shockwave or because you felt like throwing a bone to the underclass, but either way, I like it. And here everybody's always sayin' that you're just



Megatron's mindless drone."

"Everybody?"

"Okay, Starscream. But he says it *really* loudly. I wonder if he knows you keep a few secrets to yourself now and then."

"Starscream: frequently talks, rarely listens. Soundwave, opposite. Many secrets gathered, many of them unimportant. This knowledge, unimportant to Megatron. For this reason, unreported."

"More's the pity for Shockwave." He laughed and skipped away again, his mood visibly improved. Apparently just knowing that a black market existed was enough to perk up that glow in his visor, which Soundwave attributed to his vaguely-described past working in one. Again his attention flitted to that curious incongruity with Autobot propaganda, patiently following Jazz as he wended his way through the not-so-crowded crowds. He was homing in on the music, of course, his steps getting more and more sprightly with the increased volume. The source wasn't a cheap stall on the walkway, however, but a fully established nightspot with walls and darkened windows.

"Not bad!" Jazz chirped approvingly. "An interesting blend he's tryin' for in there: early Black Eyed Peas overlaid on a traditional Cybertronian-style beat. The mixing is amateurish at best, but you can't fault him for trying something new, and the result is not *un*-pleasing to my audios. Or the pedes." He pressed himself suggestively against the wall and fixed Soundwave with a hopeful grin. "Don't suppose you'd care to break character and take us inside? Let me dance for you in a proper setting for once, without these stupid chains holding me back."

"Jazz, always dancing in those chains."

"I skip and twirl in these chains," Jazz corrected. "That's not dancing, not the real kind, not like what I can do when I really put my spark into it. I was *made* to dance, Soundwave. Give me a chance, and I will give you such a show. Promise you'll enjoy it."

Temptation gripped Soundwave. Jazz was beautiful and graceful, and begging to perform for him. The thought of Jazz dancing for his pleasure was enough to make the fuel tingle in his lines, as was the shallow satisfaction of showing off to the whole city what was his. But that last part alone was the reason he had to shake his head.

"Request, impossible. This nightspot, permanent establishment. Permit and licensing for such a venture, guaranteed favor from Shockwave. Owner, therefore, loyal to Shockwave and will report deviations such as Autobot without chains. Such attention, not welcome."

"It's not as if Decepticons don't ever let their slaves out of their chains when they have to. The Constructicons, they -"

"Shockwave will ensure Megatron's attention also. That outcome, not desired." Unhappily he thought about that day Megatron and Jazz had surprised each other in the marketplace. He did not want Megatron to hear stories about Jazz dancing unrestrained in a public venue, looking, as Megatron had darkly warned against, 'happy'. He wouldn't suffer to allow it, not for any reason.

Jazz's shoulders dropped in obvious disappointment. "You're right, what was I thinking? Megatron... he's probably a terrible tipper. It is a bad idea." A forced smile accompanied the forced joke, and Jazz patted the wall in a final caress before he turned away. "Maybe some other time."

Indeed. Mentally, Soundwave amended 'maybe' to 'certainly'. It was only a matter of finding the right circumstances. When Jazz was a few steps away, he spoke up. "Your promise, made. You

will keep it."

Jazz didn't miss a beat. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

---

The marketplace was quieter, and so was Soundwave's life. The orn following his strategic victory over Shockwave (the twins simply dubbed it 'the great smackdown') brought with it a peace that Soundwave relished, however temporary it might prove to be. The tension that had been suffocating their home popped, like a bubble, leaving the air clear for the first time in what felt like vorns. It was so easy to see it in his own symbiotes; their voices were louder, their chatter more animated, their arguments more likely to turn into spontaneous fits of wrestling. And afterwards, vents wheezing and giggles still tapering off, they'd perch on his shoulder or fling themselves onto his lap while he pursued his endless hax match against Jazz. Soundwave didn't forget, not for a second, what Jazz had done to the Combaticons. But he watched his slave tease and cuddle his cassettes with a fair degree of patience now, calm and speculative. Just because he hadn't figured it out yet didn't mean he wouldn't, and in the meantime he was pleased to have his home happy again.

He also, as should be expected, found himself watching Jazz for another reason. It didn't take much to trigger the memory of what happened in his office that day, and if Soundwave concentrated, he could still feel Jazz's glossa running along his wires. He knew exactly where it had touched, and where it had not. He remembered the eager gleam in Jazz's visor, his quick ventilations, the movement of lips against his own hand's soft plating. Every exquisite memory brought on a surge of lust that had to be promptly tamped down or blocked off from his ever-curious symbiotes. Not that they didn't pick up a little of what happened that day, of course, but Soundwave was not ready to share Jazz with them just yet. Particularly since Jazz's actions had left a few questions along with those tingling wires.

He let most of an orn go by before he brought it up, waiting until they had their privacy in the washracks. Jazz was scrubbing at his armor with a foamy brush, tiny flecks of soap spattering him as he worked.

"Jazz, query."

"Ask away."

"Your actions, in my office that day. Enjoyed?"

"Does it matter? You liked it, right?"

"Performance, satisfactory," acknowledged Soundwave. Jazz was concentrating on his task, not meeting Soundwave's gaze. "Reason why?"

"Oh, that was just my way of saying 'thank you'," Jazz answered breezily. "On behalf of Chromia. And everybody else who hates Shockwave, which is, ya know... everybody. It was the least I could do."

"Triumph, very pleasing."

"Not for him, I think."

"Triumph, not over Shockwave," Soundwave corrected. "Triumph, over Jazz."

That got Jazz to stop what he was doing and take one step back, looking Soundwave straight in the optic. "Beg pardon?"

"Jazz's service, excellent," he continued smugly. "Your obedience for sake of my pleasure, extremely gratifying."

"Obedience?" Jazz scoffed. "Which room were you in? You didn't order me into anything, least of all getting on my knees. I told you, I did it because I wanted to."

"Reminder: your willingness my stated goal in the beginning. Challenge accepted, now met."

"Wh-" Jazz's mouth opened, but nothing else came out, and now that no full words seemed forthcoming, apparently couldn't remember how to shut it again. Going by the blank, pale glow of his visor, the truth was hitting home. It was the first time Soundwave had ever seen Jazz well and truly flustered, and he savored it like sweet high grade on the glossa.

"But, that... doesn't count."

"Explain."

"That was special circumstances! What happened that day- you didn't do it just so I would do *that*."

"That matters?"

Again Jazz couldn't seem to find words, and Soundwave was entertained by his mouth opening and closing a few times before the air of a faint sulk settled down around his slave.

"Well. Look who thinks he's so clever, just because he outwitted and publicly humiliated Shockwave in under four breems. Just so you know, I'd have done it in two."

Mask concealing his smirk, Soundwave braced a fingertip under Jazz's chin to ensure he had his full attention. "Now, say it."

"Say what?"

"You know what."

Jazz did know what. Sullen rebellion flashed across his faceplates he spoke up in a grudging mutter. "Soundwave seven. We are tied again. Happy?"

"Soon."

Soundwave dropped his hand to Jazz's chest, let his fingertip glide down the curve of his armor, then closed his hand around Jazz's wrist. With the other, he pried the brush out of Jazz's grasp and dropped it. Without moving a strut, somehow Jazz's posture turned very cautious.

"Let go of my hand, Soundwave."

"Why?"

"Because I know what you're thinking, and it's not going to work. You think you can go into my wrist joint, turn me into a quivering bundle of wires like I did for you? That won't happen. I get Decepticons off, not the other way around."

"Jazz, seeking control."

“No, I just –“

“Understand this.” Soundwave advanced and Jazz backed up, his wrist still trapped in Soundwave’s grip. “Soundwave, not Skywarp. Not Starscream. Your actions in their berths, witnessed. In your mind, everything seen.” Jazz twitched at the reference but said nothing, apprehensive gaze still fixed on Soundwave as he backed into the wall. “Jazz, works to please masters with skillful technique, distracting them, controlling the pace. Afraid of total submission, afraid to receive rather than give.”

Deliberately he tilted Jazz’s arm forward, and ran a finger along Jazz’s wrist joint. Jazz’s vents hitched, but he didn’t move.

“For your former masters, enough. But Soundwave, superior. Cannot be tricked into satisfaction with your glossa, however talented. Must have *all* of you.” He stopped teasing Jazz’s wrist and glided the back of his hand alongside Jazz’s face. “Willing. Trusting. Holding nothing back. Jazz must be completely mine. Understood?”

He swept his hand around to the other side of Jazz’s face, gliding it ever so softly over his dermal plating. It was hot in here, the steam was starting to billow around them, tiny droplets freckling Jazz’s visor. Jazz tried to hide it, but Soundwave could see him swallow.

"Why is it always the washracks when this comes up?"

"Preference, berth?" Soundwave lowered his head alongside Jazz's, close enough to feel the humming of his systems underneath the steady hiss of water. "Or couch?"

"Ha ha."

Jazz tilted his head back against the wall when Soundwave drew back, optics level with his own. With a tiny snick, his facemask sprang open, exposing his mouth that was now so very near Jazz's.

"Now, answer question. Understood?"

“I got you,” Jazz whispered stiffly. “But you won’t get that. Nobody - not Autobot, not Decepticon - has ever gotten that.”

“Because loss of control, feared.”

"That's rich, from the mech who makes me eat out of his hand."

"Soundwave master," he pointed out. "And Jazz, mine... someday. Soundwave, very eager for that day."

He pushed himself away from Jazz, mask springing back into place. "Collect brush, and continue." Jazz stared at him, looking just a little dumbfounded, but Soundwave just waited patiently under the water. Finally, Jazz picked up the brush and started where he'd left off. They finished their bathing session in silence.

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"How long do you think it'll be," Rumble asked not-so-idly, fiddling with a broken camera, "before Shockwave tries to kill you?"

Soundwave's hands barely paused in their skimming over the console, and his only response was to

spare one uninterested glance at the twins. They were not deterred.

"Don't look at us like that," Frenzy complained. "It's a valid question. Did you or did you not just score the victory of a century over him? In public? In front of Megatron? You could have shot out his only optic and he'd hate you less. How long do you think he'll wait before he tries to kill you?"

"And more importantly, how do you think he'll try?"

"We all know he can't shoot you, but even if he actually managed to hit you, it'd be too obvious who did it. So that's out."

"I figure that since he's got half the city in his pocket, he'll just hire some dumb grunts to jump you in an alley."

"Or maybe he'll poison your energon ration."

"Plant some explosives under the loft."

"Rig some construction to fall on you!"

"This conversation, pointless," Soundwave said impatiently. "And distracting. If bored, permitted to leave office."

"It's different for you," Frenzy huffed. "You walk the halls, and nobody has the nerve to even look you in the optic. Instead we get all the nasty looks from Shockwave's stupid buttonpushers, and we're pretty sure from Shockwave too, even if he doesn't have a face. There is no way he does not want to kill you. Aren't you just the teeniest bit concerned?"

"Negative."

"Well why not?" they whined. Soundwave did not look up from his work.

"Consideration, Shockwave frequently argues with Starscream. Starscream, sometimes victorious. Shockwave, never attempted assassination against Starscream."

"Oh." They processed that. "Well... I guess that's true."

"Not that Shockwave is any kind of match against Starscream to begin with."

"Implications?" Soundwave asked coolly.

"Not that he's any kind of match against you either," Rumble said hastily.

"But we were kinda thinking about ourselves."

"Concerns, groundless. Assassination of Decepticon officer, act of disloyalty to Empire and to Megatron. Shockwave, not capable of such disloyalty. Attack against me, or possessions, unwise and unattainable."

"Which isn't the same thing as saying he doesn't want to."

"Shockwave's desires, not my concern. Symbiotes avoiding workshift, my concern." He leveled a meaningful look at them both, who hunched their shoulders defensively.

"Fine, we're going."

"But before you boot us back out into the halls, at least tell us this: if there's nothing to worry about, what's got Ravage so tense? Or is he wrong too?"

Soundwave hesitated. Ravage was indeed tense, but for different reasons than the twins imagined. "Discussion with Ravage, intended later."

"Fine, don't tell us."

"But if you're planning on smashing him into the dust again, at least give us a heads up so we can block out the yowling."

"Smashing, not intended. Your duties wait, dismissed now."

"If you need us, we'll be getting bored out of our minds in the command room."

They clumped resentfully out the door, leaving him alone with the monitors. For most of the day Jazz had been quietly playing games on his datapad, but now he'd dozed off on the couch. Laserbeak was perched on his chest, beak tucked under one wing in her recharge, while Buzzsaw slept up on the back edge of the couch. Soundwave didn't like Jazz sleeping so much in the middle of the active cycle, and now that he'd finished drafting the morning's report, he would go home to wake him. But first -

*Combaticons, report.*

With extreme care Soundwave bundled his message under a stream of innocuous data, hidden to anyone but a comms expert. No good encrypting it too deeply, or the intended recipients would be unable to open it.

*Your plan, known. Extended silence, not conducive to making amends to Megatron. Reveal location now. Combaticons, respond.*

Not inclined to say anymore, Soundwave fired the message off into the Combaticons' personal intranet, where it would bang up against their receptors until they were forced to decrypt and read it. Soundwave wiped out all logs on his console that gave evidence to the message, then powered down the console and shut it off.

---

Ravage appeared at his side once he'd left Headquarters, shimmering soundlessly into existence off on his left. This close, his unease was palpable; no wonder it was bothering the twins so much.

*"Ravage, upset."*

A soft growl was his immediate response, before Ravage's thoughts unfolded into a more specific answer. Images of unhappy Cybertronians whisked through the link, and their muttered conversations that always managed to be caught by Soundwave's cameras no matter how careful they thought they were being. *Imbalance* was the main thought underscoring every scene.

He was right. Shockwave's popularity had been dropping steadily since the mid-vorn, and the raid on Iacon's street markets had delivered the killing blow. Hatred was now almost universal throughout the city. The only exceptions were Shockwave's own underlings, and any mech rich enough to have been granted some sort of favor from the premier. Even that, however, was not

genuine affection or loyalty, just obedience for the sake of his privileges. Take away his status, and he'd have nothing left.

This would not have bothered Soundwave if it weren't for the fact that everyone on the planet - and probably the entire galaxy - knew that Starscream was Shockwave's opposite in every way. By default, anyone not in the pro-Shockwave camp was in the pro-Starscream camp; Starscream who was, as Jazz had pointed out, a glamorous and stunningly attractive war hero. He also possessed an ego the size of the city, and ambitions that were not loyal to Megatron in the slightest. With most of the city's favor turned toward him, Starscream just might get it in his head that it was time for an overthrow.

*More, Ravage added, while Soundwave was sunk deep in his thoughts. Starscream/Shockwave imbalance. Soundwave/Shockwave imbalance.*

What? Soundwave was moderately startled to glean several overheard snippets of conversation from Ravage's recordings, conversations that praised him as their great hero. True that he'd involved himself to some small degree in that market raid, but unsuccessfully. And his recent victory over Shockwave had been nothing more than a defensive move to keep his authority safe. The only result was that everything stayed exactly the same as it was before. In the corner of his vision, he watched a passerby nudge his friend and point to Soundwave.

*"Their impressions, mistaken. Reasoning, illogical."*

Ravage snorted, decidedly unimpressed with the citydwellers' capacity for logic. But the root reason for his unease was becoming more clear. Whether he wanted it or not, Soundwave was now considered to be a player in the politics of the empire. Not his traditional role, but things had been changing lately. And the cause, at least according to Ravage, was upstairs in his home sleeping on the couch.

*"Shockwave's unpopularity, his own doing," Soundwave pointed out. "His policies, not Jazz's fault."*

Ravage retaliated with a chain of cause-effect reasoning that described how Shockwave's raid had been triggered by Soundwave's interference with his jurisdiction, which had been triggered by Jazz provoking those ridiculous corrupt lawkeepers.

*"Responsibility to prevent theft existent, with or without Jazz."*

To which Ravage snarled that Soundwave would have never been on that street to begin with if it weren't for Jazz.

*"Enough," Soundwave snapped, pausing in front of his home to fix Ravage with an authoritative stare. "Would have been, would not have been, impossible to know. Factors, many and complicated. Your desire, that I remain as before? At home and in solitude, grieving over failure?"*

Ravage flinched and ducked his head, displaying some regret in his posture if not contrition.

*"Soundwave, capable of making decisions and taking actions under own cognizance. My preference, you recognize that and act accordingly. All problems in this city, not entirely fault of Jazz."*

*Jazz first/changes after,* was the determined response. Soundwave shook his head.

*"Changes, result of end of war. Jazz, incidental. Ravage knows this. Dismissed now."*

Ravage was still not happy, but he knew Soundwave was right about that last part. Unable to produce any more argument, for now, Ravage huffed and melted back into the darkness.

Soundwave exhaled, defused his own irritation by reminding himself that Ravage was only trying to help, and entered his home. Upstairs, the loft was as peaceful as the rest of Iacon was not. The twins stirred and chirped sleepily at his approach, and in invitation he opened his chest. They were due for synchronization, and both of them willingly folded up and nestled inside.

Still Jazz did not wake up. Soundwave circled the couch, watching him, before settling himself on top of his carelessly napping slave. The jostling of the cushions, and the sudden heavy weight, finally got a response. Jazz shifted, discovered he couldn't move, and tensed warily before his visor flickered on.

"You're not Laserbeak," he mumbled.

"Observation, correct."

"You're too heavy. Get off."

"Request declined. Soundwave, comfortable." He rested his chin on the curve of Jazz's chest armor, listening to the soft hum of his spark. "Jazz, not permitted to sleep during active cycle."

"Didn't get much sleep last night. What was I nervous about? Oh yeah - *this*." He wriggled uncomfortably underneath Soundwave, which didn't improve his situation in the slightest but resulted in distinctly enjoyable sensations for Soundwave.

"Open mouth."

"What are you gonna put in it?"

Soundwave unsnatched one of Jazz's treats and held it up. "Only this. Open mouth."

Jazz still looked wary, but he opened his mouth and let Soundwave feed him. "Is that it? Or do you just plan on staying there until I overheat and go into stasis?"

"Stasis, not desirable outcome," Soundwave assured him, allowing his hands to wander up the sides of Jazz's body. "Not outcome intended."

"Okay, okay," Jazz said quickly, trying to push off Soundwave's hands and not doing a very good job of it. "You've made your point. I was a bad, bad slave for trying to give you pleasure instead of the other way around. What could I have been thinking? Uh, let me get on top and I'll make it up to you."

Soundwave blew a rather exasperated puff of air from his vents. "Jazz, now trying to irritate me."

"A technique tried and true."

"Jazz, relax." Soundwave pinned his arms to the cushions underneath and held him still, putting a stop to the constant squirming. "Harm, not intended. Only enjoyment. Allow repayment for actions taken in my office."

"You really don't have to."

"Statement, untrue. Favor not repaid is unfair and Soundwave..." He retracted his mask and lowered his mouth to the wires under Jazz's jawline. "Always fair."



With fragile care he extended the tip of his glossa to one of Jazz's sensor wires, and gave it a tiny lick. Jazz's vents hitched and he flinched a little, but only a little. Without letting up his grip on Jazz's arms, Soundwave traced a longer path down the wire, and even remembered to blow on it afterward. Perhaps he wasn't quite the 'expert' Jazz was, but he was not a novice either. There was no reason why Jazz should not enjoy this; already Soundwave could feel his spark's beat accelerating. Again he went for the wire, this time nibbling at it delicately. Jazz gasped, but instead of tipping up his chin as Soundwave had hoped he would, he tried to tuck it down and twist out of reach.

Disappointed, Soundwave relaxed his hold on Jazz's arms and glided his hands up to shoulder joints. Deftly he slipped his fingertips inside, but instead of trying to stroke the wires he tickled his fingertips over them instead.

Jazz convulsed out of reflex, surprised into allowing his armor to loosen up a little. Promptly Soundwave repeated the move, and Jazz smothered in his throat what sounded suspiciously like a snort.

"Are- are you trying to tickle me into submission?"

"For Jazz, proven vulnerability."

"Truly you are the face of evil." He jumped and swallowed back another giggle when Soundwave tickled him again, exposing more of that tempting throat. Victoriously Soundwave swooped in and targeted another wire with his glossa, and this time he could feel the sharp uptick in Jazz's core temperature. He was no longer holding Jazz down, yet Jazz was not struggling. That openness, that *trust* that he'd gotten such a brief glimpse of on the mid-vorn was starting to show again. Soundwave could almost taste it. And speaking of tasting...

*"Soundwave!"* Megatron snarled, comm clicking through without warning or permission. *"Report to my coordinates, NOW. And bring that slave of yours with you."*

Later, Soundwave would recall that his lips had been on the brink of touching Jazz's, and that Jazz had not been trying to turn his mouth away. But now he only noticed the fuel chilling in his lines, as he peeled himself away from Jazz's warmth and sat up. Jazz saw the change in his posture right away and blinked, confused.

"What?"

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on defiance

“We’re not going to Headquarters.”

Jazz’s voice was almost too quiet to be heard over the whine of Soundwave’s thrusters. Iacon rolled past beneath them, the buildings steadily getting smaller and more decrepit as they got farther from downtown.

“Negative. Megatron’s orders, report to his current coordinates. Location: partially developed sector.”

“In public. Not his usual style, but I guess even an emperor gets bored now and then.” Soundwave could feel Jazz’s grip tighten against his armor, in a way that had nothing to do with fear of being dropped. “Feel free to look away if you want, while he’s... busy. It gets a little rough, now and then.”

Dread tightened around Soundwave’s spark again, and he fought the urge to clamp his arms around Jazz more securely. It was a pointless waste of time to wish he wouldn’t have to let go. Megatron had summoned, and Megatron must be obeyed. Promptly, when he sounded as angry as that. Soundwave knew from long experience that every nanoklik he was kept waiting his temper would only get worse, so he’d clapped Jazz back into his chains and flown off the balcony without delay. Now there was nothing but the fast-dwindling distance between them and whatever fury Megatron was ready to unleash.

The coordinates aligned with a spokedwheel intersection of streets in one of Iacon’s grimmer ghettos, an unfashionable and unimportant sector in the city. It held no factories, no shops, only stacks of compartment dwellings that were so poor they only had one power hook-up to share for each floor. In the night cycle, Soundwave knew well enough from his casseticons’ recordings, this area was packed to bursting with mecha, but now it was mostly quiet. The denizens would be in downtown, begging or working to feed themselves. Soundwave saw no one as he soared around a final bend and spotted the intersection. His spark clenched again when he saw how many were waiting for them: not just Megatron but Starscream and Shockwave, and strangely, Scrapper and Scavenger. They were all gathered in front of the requisite Megatron statue that graced almost every functioning intersection, watching in stony silence as Soundwave descended to the ground. Without a word he tipped Jazz onto his pedes, and bowed.

“About time,” Megatron grunted, but his gaze moved almost immediately from Soundwave to Jazz. “Now I can get some answers.” He crooked his finger in a beckoning gesture. “Come here, Autobot.”

Jazz’s struts were rigid with tension, though Soundwave wasn’t sure how much of that was noticeable to the other Decepticons. He was reasonably sure that nobody else saw the subtle light patterns flicking back and forth across Jazz’s visor, canting his vision frantically to every possible angle, trying to size up the situation and understand what was happening. To Soundwave’s practiced optic, Jazz was obviously bewildered, but he swallowed back his fear and moved closer to Megatron. The silence was starting to get unbearable when Megatron stepped to the side, allowing Soundwave and Jazz a clear view of the statue behind him. Splattered across most of the base was a pattern Soundwave hadn’t put any thought to for a long time, shockingly red against the drab surroundings.

It was the Autobot symbol.

Everyone's attention had shifted to the Autobot out of reflex, when Megatron stepped aside, but now Soundwave watched their optics lock eagerly back onto Jazz. None of them were quite sure what to expect, but they didn't want to miss it, and Soundwave knew his slave could never resist showing off for an audience. Jazz had to think about it for a second or two, but he did not disappoint.

Flashing his brightest, cheekiest grin at Megatron, he asked, "Neighborhood beautification?"

Megatron's response was to take Jazz's head in one hand and slam it hard against the heavy base. Inwardly Soundwave flinched at the crunch of metal on metal, but he kept his posture perfectly still. Jazz staggered a step back, looking dazed, though not very surprised.

"Go ahead, slave. Test me. See if I'm in the mood for your little jokes."

Jazz shook his head gingerly, visor flickering to calibrate. "I see you're not. But if you didn't call me out here for my jokes, then why am I here?"

"To answer for it," Megatron snarled, bending ominously close. "Did you really think this pathetic display would amount to anything for you and your friends, even if the Constructicons hadn't found it in under a day? What did you think it would get you, other than the worst beating of your miserable life?"

"You think I did this?" Jazz vents were flowing hard, still trying to cope with the shock of the sudden head collision, but he did his best to look the graffiti over with a cool and appraising air. It was big, almost big enough to cover the entire base, and painted thickly enough to obscure most of the caption underneath. It'd been painted by hand rather than using a design program, but was still a reasonably good approximation of the famous symbol. Jazz laid a fingertip against the metal, and shook his head. "Nah. Not my style."

"Not your *style*," Megatron echoed, his tone dark and dangerous. Jazz ignored the signals.

"I'd have painted it on your front door."

This time it was a backhanded smack that nearly spun Jazz completely around. He bit back a yelp of pain, staggering hard to keep upright.

"Clever little Autobot is going to get himself killed if he's not careful," Megatron warned, moving to circle Jazz. "Do you think I'm not angry? Do you think I won't rip you apart, piece by piece, until you beg to confess?"

Jazz wiped some bleeding fluid from his mouth with a shaking hand. "If I may be bold enough to ask, my lord, what makes you so sure that I have anything to do with this... slapdash job of Prime's symbol?"

"Oh I know it's you. It has to be you. Always smirking at your Decepticon masters when you think I'm not looking, always holding yourself so proud as if you were superior, you still don't seem to understand that you lost the war. Now you're trying to – what? Rally your troops? Make some kind of pitiful stand against my empire? With *paint*? What stupid game are you playing at?"

"My games," Jazz said coldly, "are never stupid. But this isn't one of them. Sorry to disappoint you, Lord Megatron, but the only thing I'm trying to lead the Autobots in is a Cybertronian rendition of *It's a Hard Knock Life*." He blew a mocking kiss to Megatron. "I love you, Miss Hannigan."

Megatron cuffed Jazz hard and this time Jazz did drop, crumpling to the street without resistance. "Get up," Megatron snapped. "And try that answer again."

Jazz's vents were starting to wheeze dangerously, and his arms shook with the effort of pushing himself upright. It took an uncomfortably long time for him to stumble back onto his pedes. "My lord, I am very honestly telling you that I did not do this. Much as I'd love to take the credit, my master has me locked down and under supervision round the clock. There is no way I could have made it all the way out here without him noticing."

Megatron glanced sideways at Soundwave, who nodded. "Then who did you order to do it?"

"I'm not even allowed to talk to other Autobots! I can't get away with *anything* under Soundwave and I'm telling you, I had nothing to do with this!"

"Then who did?" Megatron thundered.

"How should I know? Has it not occurred to you that, just maybe, one of your loving subjects is less than happy with Decepticon rule? Maybe one of these poor saps is trying to tell you something."

Megatron stiffened, optics glittering menacingly, and he advanced on Jazz. Two large fingers poked Jazz hard in the chest, forcing him to stumble back. "The affairs of my empire are not your concern, slave. Your only concern is staying on the right side of my mercy, which is vanishing fast as I speak. Try and shift the blame all you like, it won't do you any good. I know you had something to do with this, and I will confirm it, even if I have to beat the answers out of your all-too-fragile head."

"Why so rattled, my lord? You said it yourself, it's just paint."

A low growl reverberated in Megatron's throat. "It's defiance. And you of all mecha should know how I deal with defiance." He raised his fist, and Jazz backed up with his hands upraised.

"Wait, wait!"

"Yes?"

"I was just going to say, could you avoid this?" He patted the old red Autobot on his chest. "I really like it."

Megatron bellowed with rage and plowed his fist into Jazz's chest armor, causing him to gasp and double over, and then he yanked Jazz up by the shoulders and threw him hard. Scavenger had to dive out of the way, barely avoiding Jazz before he crashed into the street. He rolled over once and lay still, terrifyingly limp, and Soundwave almost jumped at the reflexive *snap-twinge* in his own carrier protocols. That wasn't right, his programming was designed to protect his cassettes from physical danger, but Jazz was not a cassette. Soundwave smothered the instinct to step forward and interfere, and concentrated on staying calm. It was only a beating, after all, a beating that Jazz's insolence had well and truly invited, and Megatron would not kill Jazz. He *wouldn't*.

"You truly amaze me, Autobot," Megatron was saying, as he stepped closer. Hastily every Decepticon backed up to allow a wider circle. "You try so hard, don't you? Always ready with a joke, no matter the pain. You put up a brave front, pretending you can't be hurt, but I know better."

In two long strides he closed the distance between them and gripped Jazz by the neck, hauling him back up to standing. Jazz's vents sounded strained, some of them possibly broken going by the way he gulped for air through his mouth. Megatron lowered his mouth close to Jazz's audio, but spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

"I remember your first few nights in my berth. Pitiful, broken, crying for your lost Prime. What a pathetic mess you were."

Jazz winced, visor shuttering briefly. "I was having a bad day."

"You were learning your lesson. Let's see if you still remember it." Megatron adjusted his hold on Jazz's neck, caressing the wires. "What are you, Jazz?"

Visibly Jazz stiffened, as if Megatron's question had triggered an unpleasant reflex. His answer had a mechanical, rehearsed feel to it.

"I am a slave, Lord Megatron."

"And why are you a slave?"

"I am being punished..." Jazz had to swallow. "For the crime of standing in your way."

"That's good. You defied me, and for that, I own you and will always own you. Nothing's going to change that, not your silly jokes and not any painted symbols. So admit that you did this, and maybe I'll go lightly on you. I can be generous, to those that understand their place in this world."

"I did - not - do it," Jazz hissed through gritted denta. "And I don't know who did. Maybe it was the ghost of Optimus Prime. Maybe it was Mirage!"

Megatron froze for a single nanoklik, before he roared and smashed his fist into Jazz's face. Jazz went careening back and slammed against the base of the statue, and would have surely dropped to the ground if Megatron hadn't yanked him upright again. Again Soundwave's programming twinged, and again he dismissed the false alert. That didn't make it any easier to watch Megatron raise his hand and strike Jazz again, and again, Jazz's wretched cries getting louder each time. Nobody else was bothered. Shockwave watched with smug self-righteousness, and Starscream was licking his lips as he followed Megatron's form with avid fascination. Jazz thrashed and screamed under the rain of blows until Megatron lost patience and tossed him back to the street.

"Had enough, slave? Or do you need more reminders of how small and weak you are? You are *nothing* compared to me."

With excruciating slowness, Jazz braced his hands against the street and tried to push himself up. His arms were trembling violently from pain and fatigue, and Soundwave was rather surprised he didn't collapse face-first. He retched a small amount of fuel and fluids, wiped his mouth, and pushed himself upright to a kneeling position.

"I know I'm small," he said hoarsely. "And weak. So how come I'm not the one who's panickin'? Why do you need an answer so bad? You really can't figure out how the paint got there, and that scares you, doesn't it?" He made a sound that might have been a grunt of laughter. "What a ways you've come, my lord. From Cybertron's most fearless gladiator, to a king jumping at shadows. You must be so proud. All hail Megatron."

Megatron stood very still, but Soundwave could see his optics darkening to the shade of cooled magma. His voice was frighteningly chilly when he spoke. "You want to talk about fear, Autobot? I can introduce you to fear. Fear may just be the last thing you ever know in this life."

He took one step closer to Jazz and kicked him hard in the fuel tanks, knocking Jazz flat onto his back. Then he settled one pede on Jazz's chest, resting most of his weight there. Jazz squirmed a little, but he was too exhausted and too injured to move.

"You're an insect under my heel, little slave. And now I'm going to smash you like one. Slowly, and as painfully as possible."

He knelt on Jazz's chest and flexed his fist, preparing to hammer it down onto Jazz's vulnerable neck, and Soundwave could not hold back anymore. Without actually planning to, he found himself stepping forward.

"Lord Megatron, suggestion. Mental interrogation, perhaps more effective."

Megatron looked up, fist still raised, and frowned blankly at Soundwave as if he'd forgotten he was even there. "What?"

"To discover explanation." Soundwave indicated the statue. "For mental interrogation, consciousness necessary."

"Oh... right." Megatron's fingers rippled and he looked longingly at the Autobot beneath him, as if weighing how important the truth really was. Eventually, and with some reluctance, he lowered his fist and stood up. "I suppose that will work too. Get on with it, then."

He kicked Jazz one more last time before moving away, which got little reaction. Jazz was lying very still, struggling to ventilate and whimpering softly. Soundwave ached to look at him. Kneeling, he placed his hand gingerly over Jazz's brow, hoping it would look more like preparation for the invasion than a small touch of comfort. Pale blue light fluttered wanly, but Soundwave was not sure if Jazz recognized him. Rapidly he switched off his external receptors and dove in. But if Soundwave had harbored any hopes that Jazz's beating would weaken his mind too, they were immediately dashed.

THEN IT ALL CRASHES DOWN, AND YOU BREAK YOUR CROWN! AND YOU POINT YOUR FINGER, BUT THERE'S NO ONE AROUND. JUST WANT ONE THING, JUST TO PLAY THE KING, BUT THE CASTLE'S CRUMBLLED AND YOU'RE LEFT WITH JUST A NAME! WHERE'S YOUR CROWN, KING NOTHING?

Soundwave left as quickly as he'd gone in. This was no place to play hide-and-seek in Jazz's mind, leaving an exhausted Soundwave to collapse in front of their audience. A swift interrogation would at least create the impression that he'd collected the truth easily. Vision still flickering back on, Soundwave stood.

"Well?" Megatron demanded. His lord was staring at him, waiting for an answer, an answer that of course Megatron would accept because Soundwave was loyal. Soundwave would never lie to him. But Jazz was close to dying and Soundwave had an obligation to him too, as one of his possessions. Soundwave must not lie to Megatron, but he must also protect Jazz.

"Jazz, not responsible for statue defacement."

It was not a lie. Soundwave knew it because he kept Jazz under close watch and forbid him contact with the other Autobots, just as Jazz said. Just because he hadn't been able to prove it in Jazz's thoughts did not change what Soundwave knew. It was not a lie, but Soundwave was willing to let Megatron *think* that he'd seen it in Jazz's mind because that was the only way Megatron would spare Jazz. It was not a lie, but it was probably the closest Soundwave had ever come to betraying his leader.

Megatron hesitated, automatically trusting his most loyal officer but clearly dismayed that he'd been deprived of the one bot he'd like to blame. "He doesn't know anything about it?"

"No evidence found in his mind," Soundwave answered truthfully.

"So now my city is under attack from mysterious paintsprayers." His gaze narrowed. "What about

you, Soundwave? Do you know anything about this? It's your responsibility to keep watch on the streets, isn't it?"

"Surveillance constant. But cameras limited in number and city very large -"

Megatron growled in disgust and slapped Soundwave hard across the face, shocking him into silence. The Constructicons jumped, and even Starscream looked too taken aback to gloat.

"Get it together, Soundwave," Megatron bit out. "This is my planet now, my empire. If I didn't make it clear earlier, I *don't want* the Autobot brand smeared all over it! It seems a simple enough request to me. Do you understand?"

Soundwave bowed his head. "Understood, Lord Megatron."

"Good." Contemptuously Megatron sneered at the half-conscious Autobot at their feet, then turned away. "Now, get rid of it."

Scrapper nodded quickly. "Of course, my lord. I'll have Mixmaster bring his solv-"

"Not just that. I mean all of them, on all the slaves. Everyone with an Autobot will see to it that the brand is scrubbed off, starting now. I don't want to see it anymore."

The Decepticons all exchanged surprised looks. Even in the heady days just after victory, when the prisoners were being divided up as spoils and getting fitted with collars, nobody had even thought of scraping off the Autobrand. The old red logo, even if it meant enemy, was simply a part of the Autobots' appearance. They'd all been wearing their respective symbols for too many centuries to even imagine one another - Autobot or Decepticon - without them.

"But my lord," Shockwave said blankly. "It is a representation of their status. The Autobrand designates slavery. Without it, what else will?"

"They wear their collars, don't they? It's enough. The war is over, Prime is dead. Time that his symbol was too."

None of them had anything to say to that, except Jazz. "So scared," he mumbled. "Fraid he'll come back?"

Megatron tensed, and looked back at Jazz. Without saying a word, he reached down and grabbed Jazz's right arm, gripped it in both hands, and *wrenched* with all his considerable strength. Struts cracked and armor buckled, and Jazz shrieked in agony before the light in his visor blacked out and he lost consciousness.

"That's better," he grunted. "We're done here. Dismissed."

Megatron's thrusters flared and he launched himself into the air, each of the watching soldiers following him in turn. Soundwave didn't move, ignoring the snide looks of both Starscream and Shockwave, waiting until they were all gone before he knelt to collect Jazz. There was no part of him that was not broken. Soundwave scooped him up as gently as he could manage, ignited his thrusters, and turned for the Constructicon medbay.

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## on the table

"Scalpel, 3/10."

"Three ten."

"Angle the light more to the left."

"Yes, master."

"Adjust the magnification."

"Yes sir."

The quiet hiss of Hook's laser scalpel, punctuated by the occasional command to his slave, was the only sound in an otherwise silent surgical theater. Soundwave watched from the farthest corner of the room, perfectly still, his gaze following the bright blue glow. Most Decepticons were not allowed in this room during an operation; Hook had learned centuries ago he could not force Soundwave out. Any time one of his symbiotes was unlucky enough to wind up on the table, Soundwave was present for surgery without question. He repaid the tolerance with total silence and zero movement, never causing distraction, and eventually Hook took his presence for granted. He hadn't glanced at Soundwave once since he started on Jazz's elbow, though First Aid shot him more than a couple of nervous looks.

"Welder, 1/10, 160 degrees."

"Yes sir."

For one Constructicon to know something was for all of them to know, so Hook hadn't so much as batted an optic when Soundwave walked in bearing his unconscious slave. Calmly he'd ordered Soundwave to carry him into the operating room, gathered his tools, and ordered First Aid to administer anesthetic. The Autobot's reaction was more surprising. Soundwave had expected the anxious little slave to erupt in useless panic over the sight of Jazz's beaten body, but he had to admit, First Aid was conducting himself professionally. He'd merely swallowed back one horrified gasp and gotten straight to work. Certainly he must have seen worse during the war, but that was a long time ago. His hands trembled now and then, as he plucked the demanded instruments from Hook's cart, but he didn't fumble, hesitate, or hinder Hook's work in any way. After putting Jazz well and truly under, he'd very competently removed the pertinent armor, swabbed and prepped the joint, and arranged scalpels in the order Hook would need them. The two of them had been working on Jazz's mangled arm for almost a joor now.

"Scalpel, 1/10."

"Yes master."

The smallest size meant he'd reached the finest details of the work. Soundwave strained to hone his vision algorithms for better detail, but it still looked like nothing but a jumble of struts and wires from here. Hook was looking pleased, though, which Soundwave took to mean the reconstruction was going well. He allowed quiet reassurance to seep into the link, wordlessly updating his symbiotes on Jazz's condition.

"Welder."

"Yes sir."

A golden spark or two flew out as Hook bent over, intent on fusing the thin struts. Such deep surgery, having to pare his arm down to so little. Ridiculously, Soundwave found himself wishing that Jazz weren't quite so unconscious. His slave was always so lively, constantly bursting with noise and movement, that to see him lying this still was unnerving. Even in recharge, his systems had their own steady rhythm. Soundwave went to sleep every night hearing that familiar hum, but First Aid's program had suspended almost all Jazz's internals. Except for the two surgeons fussing over his arm, there was nothing to show Jazz was not dead.

"And that's the last of it." Hook flicked off his welder and straightened, relishing a loud pop of the backstruts. "I am a genius of micro-reconstruction. That joint will be better than new once the welds have set. Good work, runt."

First Aid beamed with relief. "Thank you, master."

"We'll leave the welds alone for a full cycle, then initiate the secondary surgeries to rebuild the rest of the arm. In the meantime, I want you to bracket every strut to hold them in place, and clamp off any nerve wires at the shoulder to induce paralysis. There'll be time enough tomorrow for you to deal with the rest of these injuries; the small dents can be pulled out, the bigger ones will have to wait for self-repair. Probably at least a few fractures in his dermal plating, you know what dressings he'll need. Does he get painkillers, Director?"

Soundwave pulled his gaze away from Jazz's face to see Hook looking at him, uncertainty in the optics. Painkillers for Decepticons were standard issue post-surgery if the damage had been inflicted in battle, not so standard if the patient had suffered a beating from Megatron. Since Jazz was only a slave, it was his master's discretion whether to spare him from the suffering that was sure to come.

"Painkillers, permitted."

"Right. Deal him sixty percent interdiction on the sensory system, at least for tonight. Put him on a fuel drip too. For now, I want you to realign his fuel lines and sensor wires and make sure there's no serious crimping. Questions?"

"No, master. I understand."

"Good. Wheel him into recovery room one when you're finished, then see me at my workstation. There's something I'll need your help with."

"Yes sir."

Hook patted him roughly on the head, half-pushing him toward the patient, then beckoned to Soundwave as he moved to the door. Promptly Soundwave followed.

"I won't say the damage was superficial," he started bluntly, "because it wasn't. Luckily for you there's nothing I can't fix, so you won't have to spend the rest of your days with a slave that has a backward elbow. Primus, he must have really fragged Megatron off. But he will live, and barring any unexpected complications he'll be fully ambulatory within an orn. Let's all hope he doesn't go for a stroll in the ghettos armed with a paintsprayer."

Soundwave stared coldly and waited for Hook's wry grin to erase itself from existence. "Right, well. I'll perform a secondary surgery on him tomorrow to repair the rest of the arm, and I'll probably need to keep him for at least two more cycles after that to ensure the welds are properly holding. You're free to stick around for as long as you like, but there's not much point to it. Even if he does

come up from the solid doping Aid gave him, he'd be too out of it to say anything sensible. Actually, I guess you won't notice a difference. Anyway, we both know Aid'll keep watch over him for as long as I let him. There's no need for you to stay."

"Understood." Soundwave's gaze moved back to the medical berth, where First Aid was fastidiously straightening Jazz's sensor wires. "Preference: remain some time longer. One symbiote will be left to monitor Jazz at all times."

Hook made a face. "Not the noisy ones."

"Laserbeak, Buzzsaw, better suited to task."

"Well if you insist, I won't argue." Hook shrugged, and saluted. "If you'll excuse me, sir. Got that one last thing to take care of."

"Dismissed."

Not really paying attention to the medic anymore, Soundwave drifted back into the surgery room. He did not possess Jazz's trick of floating silently about, and First Aid noticeably flinched at his return. His vents stuttered, but when Soundwave said nothing he returned his attention to stitching Jazz's lines back into place. Occasionally he risked a glance up to make sure Soundwave wasn't coming any closer, but otherwise kept his focus on the task at hand.

Ten breems later, he tied his final knot and stood. "I'm, uh, finished," he said softly, "sir. I'll just wheel Jazz into our recovery room now. I promise I'll take very good care of him."

He bowed, unhitched the lock on Jazz's gurney, and prepared to push him out of the room. Before he could, Soundwave put out a hand and stopped it. The Protectobot's optics paled with apprehension. "Sir?"

"Your medical attentions to my slave, required. More personal attentions, not needed or wanted. Appropriate distance expected at all times. And conversation unrelated to medical exchange, *forbidden*. My instructions, understood?"

He leaned a little closer, and First Aid looked he might freeze up and fall over. "You- you mean I'm not allowed to talk to Jazz?"

"Correct."

"Oh." The little bot looked crushed, but was wise enough not to argue the point. "Yes sir, I understand. I'll just settle him in his room."

"Proceed." Soundwave stepped back and allowed First Aid to pass, then went on to fluster and frighten the slave by following close on his heels into the recovery room. First Aid locked the gurney's wheels, and with expert precision inserted a tube into Jazz's good arm for the fuel drip. Again he bowed, and fled the room.

The world turned silent again. The walls of the recovery room were half-transparent, to allow full observation, but completely soundproof to allow the patient's rest. Soundwave stood by Jazz's sleeping form and watched First Aid return to Hook's side, bright-opticked and unsuspecting. Hook gestured for First Aid to sit on a stool, and dipped a cloth rag in solvent. The slave cocked his head, looking puzzled but not frightened. It wasn't until the rag touched his chest that he understood, and panic flared in his optics. He scrambled off the stool and tried to bolt, but Hook caught him on the arm with one large hand and dragged him back. Soundwave did not think he yelled at First Aid, exactly, but an irritated look crossed his face and he said something sharp. First Aid thrashed in his

grip, trying to peel his hand free, and when that didn't work he crossed his arms over his chest and tried to twist away out of reach. Like Soundwave's, his mask automatically snapped into place for any physical threat, and Soundwave couldn't tell if he spoke. From the way Hook was shaking his head, it was likely First Aid was begging him not to do this.

Unexpectedly, Jazz stirred. A flicker of light skittered across his visor before it went dark again, and he whimpered.

"-cht."

Soundwave quickly put a hand to Jazz's head, stroking him softly, hoping to lull him back to sleep. That arm was so frighteningly bare, all struts and exposed wires, and Soundwave didn't want Jazz to switch on his visor and see it for himself. He did not take the hint and slip back into recharge though, and twitched and moaned again.

"-chet."

"Jazz, sleep now. Your rest, necessary."

Outside, First Aid had given up on any physical resistance and had buried his face in his master's chest, shoulders heaving with presumed sobs. Patiently Hook rubbed his hand on his back, but he didn't let go of his rag. After a few kliks, he peeled First Aid off himself and sat him back on the stool. Vents flaring visibly even from this distance, First Aid dropped his face in his hands and continued to keen while Hook got to work scrubbing off the Autobrand.

"R-chet," Jazz mumbled. "Hurts."

"Painkillers, taking effect soon. Sleep now." He dropped his other hand onto Jazz's, and was surprised at the sudden hard squeeze Jazz gave it.

"R-chet. Donlet Prime go back out. Gotta bad feeln. Keep'm here, kay? R-chet?"

"Designation, Soundwave. Sleep now."

The desperate clutch on his hand was already loosening; Jazz had no strength to speak of right now. His grip slackened and his head lolled slightly to one side. One last flash sparked within his visor.

"Donlet Prime go..."

The deed was done. Hook tossed his rag back onto the bench, dropped a final pat on First Aid's shaking shoulders, then turned and left. The ceiling lights switched off, dousing the Autobot in darkness, and still he didn't move. Neither did Jazz anymore. The medway was quiet again, still, and full of broken things.

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"Whoa," breathed Rumble.

"Yeah," added Frenzy. "Sorry, boss."

By now, all of them had at least a vague idea of what had happened. They knew about Megatron, and that Jazz had come off the worse for an encounter with him, and they knew the Autobrand was mixed up in it somehow. Now the flickering faded from their optics as the data packet finished downloading its material, complete with every insult, hard blow, and scream of pain. They would

never admit that Soundwave's emotional output had been too much for them to handle, but unconsciously their hands found one another and held on.

"So then what happened?"

"Constructicon Hook conducted successful surgery on Jazz. Full recovery predicted, but consecutive surgery required later today. Damage, extensive."

"So why aren't we there right now?"

"Yeah, can't we go see him?"

"And why did you wait until now to even tell us what's going on?"

"Why did you make us stay away all night?"

"Did you stay with him the whole time? By yourself?"

"We would have come if you'd let us!"

Soundwave's hands continued their work across his console, moving automatically. He was prepared for a backlash of resentment from the twins, after everything they'd just been subjected to, and wasn't bothered by their anger. The questions themselves were more of a problem. Soundwave had not intended to stay in Hook's medbay for the entire night cycle. Not only was it pointless with Jazz unconscious, it was unwise. Soundwave held no illusions about the Constructicons' affinity for gossip, and now was not a good time for word to spread that Soundwave hovered by the berth of his injured slave all night long. The plan was to stay for just a little while, then leave Laserbeak and Buzzsaw behind as monitors while he went home to rest.

But then Jazz stirred in his sleep, crying for Ratchet. Grief had pulled at Soundwave's spark, to hear him plead for Optimus Prime, crushing it under the weight of unwanted thoughts. Jazz was not calling out for his master, but a leader that had been dead for six years. Slavery had done nothing to change his priorities. Following Prime had been the downfall of every Autobot, but for Jazz and the young medic out there weeping over his lost brand, that didn't seem to matter. Decepticon rule didn't matter. Take away their collars, open the cages, and both of them would flee into the night and never look back. Soundwave remembered well enough what he'd seen in Jazz's mind. He also remembered the cassetibots calling out for Blaster, right up until the day they died.

It was almost enough to break him, but Soundwave had remained still and standing by Jazz's berth. He didn't dare risk leaving Laserbeak, or any of his symbiotes, there to watch and possibly hear Jazz call out for his friends again. And so he'd stayed, keeping silent vigil over his slave, half wishing he would just wake up already and half afraid of what - *who* - he would say when he did. It was just past dawn of the active cycle when that visor finally fluttered on again. Soundwave had tensed when Jazz's head rolled to the side, pale blue light trying to focus on him.

"Soundwave?"

Vents exhaling in relief, Soundwave had moved closer and laid a gentle hand on Jazz's helm. "State condition."

"Mgh... one notch up from the scrap heap." He tried to shift and visibly winced from the pain. "Why can't I feel my- oh, never mind." Soundwave had moved his hand too late to prevent Jazz from seeing his own deconstructed arm. Quickly he looked away. "I remember now. He was so mad."

"Jazz, provoked Megatron too far."

"Eh, he's done worse to me. You know. You saw it." Jazz shot him a pointed look before throwing another resigned glance at his arm. "Besides, look on the bright side. It could have been one of my legs. Least I can still dance."

Jazz smiled wanly, and tilted his head slightly into Soundwave's cupped hand. "It's practically tomorrow, and here you are. You didn't sleep all night, did you?"

"Jazz's condition critical; recharge unnecessary. Your own rest, more important." He opened his chest, allowing Laserbeak and Buzzsaw to wake up at last. "Twins, assigned to your company while I return to work."

"Do you have to go?"

"Affirmative."

Laserbeak cawed with dismay at the sight of Jazz, settling delicately beside his shoulder so that she might nestle up against him. Buzzsaw chose the more strategic vantage point atop the fuel drip dispenser, positioned to see all the medbay. Soundwave mentally promised to send them the full explanation later, and gave Jazz a final caress.

"Sleep more. Second surgery scheduled later. My return, certain."

"Never doubted it for a second."

"Boss? Yo, boss?"

Soundwave dragged his attention back to the present, acutely conscious of his own sluggish mental state. He was no stranger to all-night shifts, but the events of the past day had been emotionally draining in a way monitor duty could never be. His processor was in desperate need of defragmentation. Rumble and Frenzy were squinting at him, concerned.

"I said, you don't think he did it... do you?"

"The thing with the paint?"

"Impossible," Soundwave answered firmly. "Jazz, confined to home and well monitored at all times. This fact known."

"Well, yeah."

"It's just..."

"If we have to, we can hack into a vid feed and loop its recording."

"Like we did that one time in Shockw-" Rumble kicked Frenzy swiftly in the leg.

"That is, we got pretty good at it sneaking around the Autobot bases. Who's to say Jazz didn't pick up the same tricks on his side of the war?"

"My surveillance system, impenetrable to hacking."

"But - "

"Delays here, unnecessary. Your presence in command room, expected. Also, extra tasks assigned: gather all information possible from Constructicons Mixmaster and Scavenger. Some questions require attention."

"When can we go see Jazz?"

"After completion of duties."

"When are *you* going to see Jazz?"

"Same. New surveillance project must see completion first."

For the first time they actually looked at what was scrolling across his screens, and blinked. "What is that, a map of Iacon?"

"What are all those dots?"

"Suitable camera locations."

"Wha...?" Their jaws hung open in identical gapes. "Are you joking? That's almost every corner in the city!"

"Inclination to joking, nonexistent. Megatron demands more surveillance of the city, Megatron's demands must be met."

"Think how many cameras that would mean!"

"It'll cost a fortune."

"And even once they're all built and installed, it'll take you three times as long to sort through the surveillance reports."

"Megatron can't really make you do this, can he?"

"Megatron, lord of Cybertron," he reminded his symbiotes. "His orders, absolute."

"Megatron's a -"

"Rumble," Soundwave said sharply. "Your opinion, not necessary. Your presence in command room, necessary. Both twins dismissed now."

They hunched their shoulders defensively. "Fine."

"You want to be even more the workaholic, who are we to stop you?"

"It's scrap like this that makes me wish Reflector survived the war. Least then you wouldn't be pulling all this weight yourself."

"And getting thanked by nobody in the process." They flounced out of the office, door whooshing shut behind them. Soundwave should have been glad for the quieter atmosphere, but it didn't take long before his systems started pestering him for a recharge cycle. The console screens blurred slightly, and he had to reset his optical relay. This project needed swift completion, to soothe Megatron's temper, but at this rate nothing was getting done. Soundwave relented, set his internal alarm for ten breems, and initiated shutdown.

---

During the night cycle, the medbay had been ominously silent. Soundwave had kept watch over Jazz's sleeping form, listening to the tiny drip-drip of fuel flowing out of its container and into the tube, the only sound in the room. Jazz would have hated it, were he conscious. Maybe the deathly still medbay was creepy to some, but at least it was peaceful and safe, which Soundwave appreciated. He'd left reluctantly, stepping over the sleeping form of First Aid on his way out.

When Soundwave returned late in the active cycle, it was to total bedlam. Rumble and Frenzy had arrived, bearing their special brand of chaos like a gift to the invalid. Jazz was lying trapped on his berth, wincing now and then as Rumble and Frenzy crawled over his dented armor, while Laserbeak screeched at them to be careful and First Aid hopped from one foot to the other in anxious dismay.

"This is so fucking cool!" Frenzy gushed, peering through the gaps of Jazz's arm. "Look, I can put my hand *through* his arm. See? In, out. In, out."

"Hey, see if you can throw something through it and I'll catch it on the other side!"

"NO," First Aid yelped, optics blanching with distress. "No please don't do that, sirs, those struts are very delicate and easily damaged --"

"*Rumble, Frenzy,*" squawked Laserbeak, "*careless activity possibly damaging Jazz.*"

"How bout if I just try to spit through the gaps? A little spit won't hurt nothin', right?"

First Aid was wringing his hands, torn between a medic's instinct to protect his patient and slavery's training to respect and obey all Decepticons. "No, no spitting! No touching! I just stitched everything back into place and the slightest pressure could --"

"Relax, Aid," Jazz drawled. "They ain't gonna hurt anythin', they're just curious. It's how they show concern."

"Sirs, I really wish you would just *tell* Jazz that you are concerned for his health, and maybe wish me luck on the next surgery..."

"Hey, whoa, who said you could operate on our slave?"

"You're like, what, five years old?"

"We want Hook to fix Jazz's arm, not some newspark that don't know up from down."

First Aid looked hurt. "Well I think I could do it, if my master let me. But I only meant that I'll be assisting."

"Damn straight you will."

"We can't afford to let anyone screw up Jazz's arm permanently. Then how would he teach us to juggle?"

"Aw, you boys really do care," Jazz said cheerfully.

"Course, it'd be kinda cool if we just left your arm open like this. We could rig up some way for you to store stuff..."

Soundwave plucked each twin off Jazz by the scruff of their necks, prompting indignant yelps.



“Enough. Hyperactivity, causing unnecessary pain and fatigue for Jazz. Both twins, excused from medbay.”

“Can’t we stay to watch the operation?”

“NO,” answered everyone in the room, Autobot and Decepticon.

“Aww.”

“All cassettes dismissed. Suggestion, review new patrol routes in office.” He tossed Rumble and Frenzy out, and gestured for the younger twins to follow. Laserbeak hopped onto Jazz’s shoulder and pecked him on the jaw – causing First Aid to jump and flinch – before taking her leave. First Aid sagged with relief once they were all gone.

“Please please please don’t let them have jostled the welds,” he muttered to himself, whipping out a magnification lens to inspect Jazz’s arm. “Master will kill me...”

“Don’t worry about it, I told you, they’re fine.”

First Aid did not reply, optics spinning and clicking as they zoomed in on Jazz’s fresh repairs.

“There doesn’t seem to be any damage, sir. The welds from his first surgery have set cleanly, and Master Hook should be able to finish repairing the arm tonight. He’ll weld the last of the breaks, reconfigure the lines, and set Jazz’s armor back into place. Paralysis will be gradually scaled back over the course of the next day, allowing Jazz limited use of his arm, at which point we’ll begin a series of exercises to test the joint. I’ll also start removing the smaller dents tomorrow, but many of the bigger ones will have to heal naturally. I’ve fortified his fuel with extra metal additives to help his self-repair along. There was also one dermal fracture, which I’ve bandaged under a magnetic clamp to keep it protected while the metal knits.”

First Aid babbled all this without pause, spotlighting each injury in turn with a laserlight and not once making optic contact with Soundwave. Jazz frowned and tilted his head, finally starting to notice what was going on and clearly displeased about it.

"D-do you have any questions, sir?"

"Negative. Progress, acceptable."

"Master Hook will be ready to start the second surgery soon; I'll just go and start prepping the theater. I'll dose Jazz now; this should start taking effect in about a breem."

He plugged a medical datapad into one of Jazz's ports and started tapping at the screen, no doubt using Hook's override codes to access Jazz's systems and initiate shutdown. "I'll be back to collect him once we're ready. Shouldn't be too long. Excuse me, sir." He bowed, and beat a hasty path to the door.

"I'd trust you to operate on me," Jazz spoke up, which got First Aid to hesitate on the threshold and look back, timid smile pulling at his lips. Then he quickly lowered his gaze and scuttled out of the room.

"Soundwave, did you tell my nice young medic that he is not allowed to talk to me?"

"Jazz, forgotten rule?"

"No," he sighed, "but I was hoping you did."

The light in his visor glowed bright blue, then just as quickly faded, an indication of First Aid's program threading its way into Jazz's systems. He grimaced and rested his head back against the inclined berth. If he was angry at Soundwave, he didn't have the energy to show it. Instead his gaze followed First Aid out in the medbay, watching him arrange tools on a cart. Sometime in the morning Hook must have found time to give the slave an actual repaint, glossing over the bare, metal-gray patch on his chest with First Aid's natural red finish. Unthinkingly, Jazz's hand moved to cover his own Autobrand.

"So when's my turn?"

"Full repaint, logically follows medical procedures."

"Soon enough, then." Soundwave watched his thumb brush absently across the old symbol, back and forth. "This must be real hell on the kids. You and me, we got built a long time before there was ever such a thing as Autobot or Decepticon. We've carried these brands a while, but not as long as they have. The Protectobots, the Aerialbots... they've never been without it. They don't even know what they look like without it."

He smiled bleakly at Soundwave. "Good thing it won't bother me so much."

Soundwave looked from him back out to the medbay, where First Aid had now been joined by his master. The two of them were preoccupied, not looking their way, and the soundproof door had slid shut after First Aid's departure.

"Jazz, responsible for painted Autobot symbol?"

Jazz's visor flickered with groggy surprise. "What?"

"Jazz, guilty?"

"C'mon, Soundwave... really? You know I couldn't. You know better than anyone the reasons I couldn't."

"Obstacles, known. However, consideration of Jazz's habits create uncertainty. Jazz, former spy, likely capable of hacking into video feed to create false loop. Instead, made effort to prove presence in home throughout active cycle. Marking polish on wall, performing tricks for camera, insisting symbiotes stay to keep your company. From certain perspective, Jazz could be seen as creating alibis. Seeking to prove innocence before crime even committed."

He'd been moving closer as he spoke, watching the way light surged and faded behind Jazz's visor. His alertness was dropping, but not so fast that he didn't show some kind of reaction to Soundwave's comments. A slow smile was starting to spread across that face.

"From a 'certain' perspective," he echoed. "Is that your perspective?"

"This known: Autobot very clever. Capable of planning sabotage well in advance."

"Soundwave, you charmer. Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Answer question." Soundwave put a hand to the berth aside Jazz's head, looming menacingly over his slave. "Jazz, guilty?"

Rather to his surprise, Jazz didn't try to parry the question with another coy remark. Instead his smile faded, and he stole another glance at First Aid through the windows.

"Everybody's so mad," he murmured. "You, Hook, Megatron... nobody's even thought to ask me how I feel about it. Nobody stops to wonder if maybe I'm not a little mad too."

"Explain."

"You know I didn't paint that thing on Megatron's statue. You know no Autobot could, we're not even allowed to walk the streets unsupervised. That means some neutral did it, and I dunno why. Guess he doesn't like the new government. Maybe Shockwave took his street stall. Maybe Starscream pushed him into a gutter. So now he starts thinking, and he decides... it'd have been better under the Autobots after all." Jazz paused to run a conscious ventilation, optical glow fading fast now. "Well it's too late now, my mech. Maybe, if you'd joined our side instead of hiding underground, we wouldn't have lost the war. Maybe you'd have been just enough to tip the scales the other way, and we'd be free instead of Megatron's slaves. Maybe, maybe, maybe."

He tried to lift his hand to Soundwave's chest, possibly to poke at the Decepticon sigil, but all he could manage was a clumsy thump against the glass. When he spoke again, his voice had an unexpected bitter twist. "Whoever it is, he didn't fight for us. Didn't fight for Prime. He has *no right* to call on that symbol now, he doesn't deserve to even hold the brush. Shoulda stepped up when it mattered."

His hand dropped back onto the berth and all the energy sagged out of his body at once. "I hope Megatron finds the guy that did it," he mumbled. "I hope he breaks every strut in his body."

Jazz slipped under sedation at last, and said nothing more.

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## on the mend

Narrow strips of gold light zipped past Soundwave, indicating the rise of the lift. The levels of Decepticon Headquarters were not many, but they were high-ceilinged, and the lift had been designed for luxury rather than speed. Soundwave watched his reflection in the highly polished platinum as the lift rose past level two, quartering facilities for some Decepticons, level three, the military archives accessible only to officers, and then finally level four, Megatron's private loft. The lift doors opened and allowed him access to a small foyer, where he had to wait for a keylock to scan and announce his presence. There were no guards; Megatron would have scoffed at the notion that anyone was stronger than him and probably knocked a savage dent in the head of anyone who suggested as much. There was only a small slave, who opened the doors and bowed to Soundwave before stepping aside to allow him in.

Bluestreak closed the doors and led him silently into the main receiving room, which was entirely windowed. Megatron was standing close to the glass, looking out contemplatively over the capital city while sparkling high grade waited forgotten in his hand.

"Soundwave," he acknowledged without turning around. "I assume you wouldn't pester me this late at night unless you had something worthwhile to bring to my attention."

"Affirmative, Lord Megatron. Some information, necessary to report."

"I see." He turned at his own pace, with a dismissive nod to Bluestreak. "Out. Go see to the other pet, he'll need a feeding after that workout."

Bluestreak bowed and backed away. Soundwave watched him retreat to a door against the far wall and open it, revealing for a split second the flash of yellow armor. Two blue optics locked on him and glowed hungrily, armor shifting and tensing in preparation to attack. If it were not for the long chains keeping Sunstreaker tethered to the wall, Soundwave was fairly certain he would have. Even after all these years of slavery, ferocity curdled around the Autobot like a wild predator, just waiting for its chance. Everyone had their theories about what went on between Megatron and his violent slave; Soundwave knew he wouldn't care to be in the room when it did. Sunstreaker's menacing stare didn't break its hold on Soundwave until Bluestreak slid the door shut.

"Well?"

"Mirage, not responsible for statue defacement."

Megatron stiffened slightly at the name, wanting to believe it but too cautious to do so right away. "How can you be sure?"

"Consideration, Mirage's greatest asset his invisibility. Size, small. Weapons, negligent. Upon discovery here on Cybertron, his escape impossible. Provided Mirage could escape Chaar, infiltrate Starscream's defenses without radar detection, and enter Iacon, stealth would be absolute priority. Drawing attention with graffiti, pointless and dangerous."

Those massive gray armor plates relaxed slightly. "There is some truth to that, I suppose. I can always count on you to speak reason, Soundwave." His vents exhaled and he helped himself to a sip of his drink. Soundwave would have liked to share in that relief, since Megatron didn't seem to be angry at him anymore, but he didn't dare. He still had bad news to deliver.

"So if Mirage didn't do it, and your motormouthed slave didn't do it, then who did?"

Soundwave braced himself. "Constructicon Mixmaster, questioned. Confirmed paint as cheap consumer grade, readily available from many distributors. Inferior quality, unlikely to be found in residence of Decepticon, therefore out of reach to any Autobot slave. Vandal, almost certainly a civilian."

Megatron didn't move, but the red glow in his optics kindled dangerously. When he didn't speak, Soundwave took that as indication to continue. "Constructicon Scavenger, also questioned. Confirmed discovery of Autobrand at 13.54 of the active cycle, when sweep of neighborhood by Buzzsaw the previous night revealed nothing. Conclusion, painting occurred sometime in 3.75 joors before Scavenger's discovery. Assessment confirmed by Mixmaster, reporting paint fresh and unchipped."

Soundwave was tempted, though wise enough not to, point out that the symbol would have certainly been discovered by at least one of his symbiotes before the end of the night. It was merely bad luck for Soundwave that Scavenger had happened upon the graffiti first, who had reported it to his superior, who promptly called Shockwave.

"So one of my subjects is responsible," Megatron murmured. "One of my followers, one of the mecha living on this planet that I singlehandedly saved from starvation. Do you suppose he enjoyed his cube of high grade the night of the mid-vorn? The little ingrate."

His grip tightened around the delicate glass flute, threatening to shatter it. "Where would they be now, Soundwave, if it weren't for me? I led the rebellion against that sopping theocratic Council, I swept away the old layers of class that kept this planet in shackles, and most importantly, I won the fight against a Prime that would have watched his own planet die rather than take Earth's fuel. And after everything that I've done for them, everything that I fought and bled for, this is my thanks? If these are the mecha I liberated from slavery, then they weren't worth the trouble. They don't deserve what I've given them."

Shockwave would have hurried to agree; Starscream would have picked apart the comments to give credit to his own accomplishments. Soundwave merely stood by in silence, offering commiseration in the only way he knew how.

"If they think I'm going to tolerate their whining ingratitude, then they're as stupid as they are forgetful. This is my planet, my empire, and I keep my *things* in good order. I'll snuff out dissent like I did Prime's spark, before it has any chance to spread through those addlebrained crowds. I will have loyalty, one way or the other."

"Understood, Lord Megatron."

"And what will you do to ensure it?"

Soundwave unspaced the datapad holding his new report. "Blueprint of Iacon's new surveillance net, now complete. Cameras arranged to cover every intersection, almost any possible angle. Under such a system, future incidents like this not possible."

Megatron took it, glancing briefly at the screen. "And you think yourself capable of handling all this raw information?"

"Lord Megatron's disappointment in my performance, displeasing. Any effort required for better service, considered necessary and acceptable."

A quick smile flashed across Megatron's face. "You really are my most loyal soldier, Soundwave. I don't know what I would do without you. Everyone else finds excuses, or scapegoats, or some

reason to complain, but you... just want to please me. And that pleases me, greatly." A heavy hand clapped onto Soundwave's shoulder, gripping it with some affection, and for the space of a sparkbeat Soundwave wasn't sure of Megatron's intentions. If his lord wanted more than just answers and a surveillance report, Soundwave would give it, as he always had. But he was so tired. He'd slept six breems over the course of the last two cycles, spent joors preparing this report, and then joors again watching Hook painstakingly reconstruct Jazz's arm. All he wanted was to go home and rest.

Megatron's attention, though, seemed turned inward. Without quite looking at him, Megatron squeezed his shoulder a final time and turned away, gaze drifting back to the city. "Do you ever miss the war, Soundwave?"

That caught Soundwave entirely off-guard, and he stared blankly. "Miss? Query, not understood."

"I know it must sound odd. But sometimes, when I'm feeling especially restless or frustrated, I do miss that war. At least then I knew who my enemy was. Maybe laser fire was scorching the air around me and the ground shaking with the oncoming assault of Autobots, but I knew I could fight them, take their pitiful lives and crush them on my way to victory. I won't say it was easy, but it was simple. I miss that clarity. I miss the *knowing*. Now instead of one obnoxious Prime I have a city full of discontents whose whining will never be satisfied. 'There's not enough fuel, the fuel is too expensive, the city is too crowded, the power grid must be expanded, the power grid is too unreliable' and on and on and on. Fix one problem and another springs up to take its place. Do they appreciate all that we do, all that the Decepticons have done to save them? No. All they can do is complain. And I can't shoot them – at least, I can't shoot all of them – because then who will I have left to rule? I must rely on your hearing, Soundwave, to tell me who's making trouble and have them brought to me. I'll know what to do then."

It was a rare moment to see Megatron so unhappy, and vulnerable. Soundwave knew how proud his leader was, how difficult it was for him to admit he could be losing control. He'd fought so hard to get to where he was.

"Lord Megatron, consideration."

"What?"

"Constructicon Scavenger in ghetto that day for purpose of clearing debris, preparing for demolition of building. Eviction of some residents necessary; surveillance indicates residents angry and resentful. Shockwave's redevelopment plans often result in such resentment. My surveillance efforts to find dissidence necessary, but other remedies also available. Perhaps some re-evaluation of policies possible, to alleviate subjects' unhappiness."

For one naively hopeful moment, Soundwave thought Megatron might actually listen. Something like recognition flickered through his optics, an understanding that he could draw his subjects to him with generosity instead of fear. Then the red glow darkened and the moment was past.

"Don't change, Soundwave."

“Lord Megatron? Clarification needed.”

“Don’t be like the others, pointing fingers, casting blame. I get enough of that from Starscream and Shockwave, I can’t have it from you too. I need you to be the one that just stands by my side and carries out my orders. Nothing more, and certainly nothing less. And I will run my empire as I see fit. Is that clear?”

Soundwave bowed his head. “Affirmative, Lord Megatron.”

“You’re dismissed. I want to be alone now.”

Soundwave bowed again, more deeply, and backed away to take his leave. Bluestreak was nowhere to be seen, but Soundwave was capable of letting himself out. The last he saw of Megatron was his leader gazing through the windows again, silent and still as one of his statues, but with a sadness the world would never see.

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Jazz was up and out of the berth when Soundwave returned to the medbay next cycle. Through the transparent walls of his private recovery room Soundwave could see First Aid cautiously guiding Jazz through rotations of his various joints, moving slowly but at a smooth and steady pace. From here, the dents were not so obvious, and now that his arm was back Jazz looked whole and healthy again. Just to see him standing was a relief.

"Physical therapy," Hook explained, absorbed in sharpening his collection of blades. "At regular intervals since the second surgery, we've been scaling back the paralysis on his arm, re-introducing circulation and sensory input. He is in excruciating pain right now, no matter how hard he tries to convince you otherwise with jokes. Those welds burn like the motherrusting pit. The most important task now is to practice moving all his joints in all the right ways, to make sure nothing's catching or sticking. The runt says everything looks good so far; barring complications you should be able to take him home tomorrow."

"Understood. Requested examination, accomplished?"

Hook glanced at him very briefly. "Yes sir. I did it this morning while he was still coming up from sedation, so he wouldn't notice. I checked every slave hobble, and they are firmly in place. Access to subspace, disabled. Access to communication links, both receptor and transmitter, disabled. Transformation cog, disabled. Access to sensory overrides, disabled. Firewall programming, disabled. Targeting subroutines, disabled. And all electroshock conduction wires fully functional. 100% slave-ready Autobot, just as Megatron ordered." He set his knife down, fixing Soundwave with a very calm but deliberate stare.

"Should I be wondering why you felt the need to check?"

"Thoroughness, appropriate," Soundwave answered just as calmly. "Occasional checks, easily performed and beneficial to security. Slaves, always a minor liability." Again his gaze moved to the Autobots, who hadn't noticed their audience yet. First Aid was rubbing his fingers underneath Jazz's armor, likely trying to massage away some of the pain, unaware he was performing what was traditionally Soundwave's task. "Your medic, a competent surgeon? Capable of removing slave's tracking collar?"

That was a question to make Hook stop and look at his own slave, thoughtful appraisal in his expression. "Well. He's a smart kid, I'll give him that, and a very quick student. Much as I hate to admit it, he had a good teacher. If he had access to a top-notch operating room with all the necessary tools, and an Autobot, and several joors of total uninterrupted quiet with no worries about being found... yes. I do think he could figure his way through extracting the collar. But he isn't going to get any of those things, now is he?"

When he didn't get an answer, he added, "Soundwave, it's not possible for First Aid to extract his own collar. He'll never get the chance to even try on another bot, and he'll definitely never be able to operate on all of them, and even if all those impossible things happened I would still know exactly where he is. The runt is stuck, and he knows it. They all do."

All but one, Soundwave thought, watching Jazz's easy smile. To Hook, however, he simply nodded. "Report, satisfactory. Dismissed." Without sparing another look for the medic he crossed the distance to Jazz's room, and entered it. First Aid, who was in the middle of massaging Jazz's elbow joint, squeaked and jumped back enough to cover half the room.

"Director Soundwave sir! I, uh, was just implementing standard physical therapy treatment as ordered by my master, he told me to do it, it's what medics are supposed to do in the case of broken struts. I had to give some directions to Jazz but it was all medical, only medical talk, always."

The slave trembled under his stare, but Jazz leaned against his berth with a roll of optical light behind the visor. "Careful Aid, or you'll short somethin' out. No need to worry; he knows every blessed thing you've said to me all day. Soundwave's always watchin'." He nodded briefly to Buzzsaw, perched on some equipment in the corner. It was true that his symbiote had carefully monitored all interaction between the Autobots, and Soundwave already knew that First Aid had kept strictly to medical conversation at all times. He also knew, simple dialogue aside, that they'd taken several opportunities to hold hands for as long as First Aid could spare the time. He didn't care for it, but it wasn't a security threat like talking could be, and - as Jazz would probably argue - technically Soundwave had never rescinded his permission for Jazz to hold hands with the other slaves. Seeing as how the medic was taking excellent care of Jazz, and that he was properly deferential to Soundwave, he would allow them that indulgence.

He moved away from the open door. "Out."

"Yes sir."

First Aid ducked his head and walked quickly to the door. "Lookin' forward to the next appointment, Aid," Jazz called out cheerfully. "And don't forget: the wet duck flies at midnight."

First Aid shot a thoroughly baffled look at Jazz just as the door slid shut, and Jazz chuckled to look at Soundwave's face. "He's a sweet kid, but he has a hard time with secret treasonous codes. Don't know what I'm gonna do with him, really."

"Baiting, pointless."

"But fun. I miss teasing you, love, I've been here two whole days and I'm bored. Did you come to take me home? I'm ready to go when you are."

"Jazz, not coming home tonight. Medical attention still necessary."

"Well I can just come back for a few appointments, can't I? Why do I have to stay? There's nothing to do here but get gawked at by nosy Constructicons and endure those joint-grinding exercises that Hook's insisting on. And I can't even talk to Aid, as Woodstock over there has made abundantly



clear. So what's the point in staying? Take me home, please?" Jazz tried to close the distance between them, but the drip line that tied his arm to the dispenser was too short.

"Jazz, just undergone two surgeries."

"But I'm okay now! Look, see, I can even dance." He tried to show off some ridiculous step, only for one of his knee joints to buckle underneath him. Soundwave caught him before he could collapse to the floor, picked him up, and sat him firmly back on the medberth.

"Jazz, not ready to come home." He paid no more attention to Jazz's fussing and began his own inspection on the arm, gently prodding and testing his joints. The armor showed a faint discoloration, which Hook had assured him would fade as Jazz's circulatory system re-established connection to the plates. Otherwise it was almost impossible to see that any injury had ever happened; the reconstruction was in perfect order. Jazz hissed and winced when Soundwave moved his arm through rotations of the shoulder and then elbow, but everything was working and moving the way it should.

"Pain, very great?"

"Like I've got acid running through my fuel lines. First Aid said that's expected, and won't up my painkiller dosing because then my circulation will slow down. Or so he says. I think he just learned too well from his sadistic teacher."

"Hook, not sadistic."

"I was talking about Ratchet."

Soundwave was lightly pinching each of his fingers, a quick grimace pulling at Jazz's expression each time. "If pain not desired, provocation unwise. Your insolence to Megatron, pointless and self-destructive."

"C'mon, I had to. You saw the look on his face when we showed up, we all knew what was about to happen. He was going to pound me through the ground no matter what I said. If I have to go down, I might as well go down with flair."

"'Flair' almost lethal," Soundwave said coldly. "Megatron's anger, very great. My intervention, only reason you are still alive now."

"Oh he wouldn't have killed me. I told you, the slaves have become too valuable as assets for the empire. He'd never kill me."

"No, Perceptor valuable. First Aid, valuable. Jazz, only arrogant. My experience with Megatron, far older than yours, and this known: Megatron intended to kill. Your behavior reckless, taunting, and stupid."

"Wow." Jazz scowled and pulled his hand out of Soundwave's grasp. "You wanna break my other arm too, so you can kick me while I'm really down?"

"Wanted: admission of mistake."

"I will admit nothing of the sort. I knew what I was doing. Primus knows I've had the practice. It's none of your business anyway, that was between me and Megatron."

"*Nothing* is between you and anyone," Soundwave snapped. Jazz looked away and Soundwave grasped his chin, forcing him to look back at Soundwave. "Soundwave master, Jazz mine."

Everything you do, every word you speak, my concern. Your actions disregarded that.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. While my arm was being torn apart, why didn’t I stop to think about how this was affecting *your* feelings? My selfishness knows no bounds.”

“Jazz, not able to understand? Your life nearly ended that day. Megatron, angry enough to kill. Jazz only spared due to my intercession; that intercession, done at great risk. Megatron, very displeased.”

“You’re just mad because he hit you. You’re not used to being the one in trouble.”

“Correction: ‘mad’ because you nearly died, and show no concern at all.”

“Just leave it alone already, Soundwave," Jazz said sharply. "It happened, I got the blame, I got the beating. I am, after all, the *slave*. I am being punished for the crime of standing in our Lord Megatron’s way.” His expression twisted with a different kind of pain. “I hate it when he makes me say that. He really does know how to hurt me the most.”

He shuddered, and again Soundwave glimpsed that fragile, so-close-to-breaking bot he’d seen once before. Jazz hid it so carefully, but someday Megatron could bring his fist down and shatter him completely. Didn’t Jazz know that? Did he not understand what Soundwave could see so easily?

“I’m tired,” Jazz whispered. “May I please take a nap, master?”

“Recharge necessary to healing process. Permission, not required.” Soundwave answered the question automatically, not at all satisfied with the end of the conversation but not willing to push the issue while Jazz was still very weak. He guided Jazz into lying down, untangled the fuel drip line, and rested his hand over Jazz’s visor. “Sleep now. My return planned tomorrow.”

“I know.”

Lightly Soundwave swept his hand down the uninjured side of Jazz's face, pinged the lights down to black, and turned to go. He would be alone in his berth again tonight, an unpleasant prospect, but it couldn't be helped. Maybe tomorrow, Jazz would be ready to come home.

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Jazz didn’t cope with his next day in the medbay any better than he had the first two. Not used to being cooped up in such a small room for so long, he was getting frustrated and restless. Soundwave knew this because he knew his slave, and recognized the agitation in his posture, the fidgeting, and the repeated tapping of his pedes. Also, he thought it would be a good idea to climb up onto his berth and dance. First Aid threw a minor fit when he caught Jazz at it, alternately threatening and begging Jazz to get back down, and only when Hook sauntered by with a sharp word to First Aid did Jazz finally get down. Laserbeak, Jazz’s monitor for this cycle, kept Soundwave thoroughly informed throughout the entire episode. Soundwave was left feeling partly amused, partly exasperated by his slave’s behavior, but not in the least surprised.

“Actions, not acceptable,” he reprimanded Jazz later, after he’d left work to come here. “Distracting to medical staff, potentially dangerous, and not conducive to healing process.”

“To the contrary, darling, I was merely following the medic’s orders. He said I should practice moving all my joints as closely to my usual habits as possible. And what’s more usual than me dancing?”

“Or showing off.”

“Same thing. Now, are we ready to go?” Eagerly Jazz waggled his arm, jostling the drip line. “Let’s get this thing yanked out of me and we can be on our way.”

“Negative. Jazz, not returning home tonight.”

“*What?* But I’m ready to go, Hook *said* I was ready to go. He looked really happy about it!”

“Hook, not your master and Jazz, not ready to come home.”

Baffled and dismayed, Jazz gaped at him. Soundwave bore the look impassively, just as he had when breaking the news to Hook one breem earlier. The Constructicon had been most displeased.

“But- I’m your entertainment. Don’t you miss your entertainment? Isn’t it lonely back home without me?”

“Other problems, of greater concern.”

Now Jazz scowled. “If this is about that thing yesterday, you can forget that. I’m not going to apologize for something that wasn’t my fault. I’m still right.”

“Negative. Jazz, very wrong.”

“And this is your plan to change my mind? Strand me here, in the Constructicon looking glass bowl until I go insane from sheer boredom? Maybe I’ll just check myself out, since you won’t. This doesn’t look too hard to undo.” Disdainfully he tugged at the line disappearing under his armor.

“You know Hook’s locks won’t hold me for a second. Maybe I’ll just up and go, how about that?”

“Go where? Iacon ghettos, with red paint?”

The light behind Jazz’s visor glittered frostily. “How ‘bout I break into your building? You might have fixed it so I can’t get out, but I’m pretty sure I can find a way in. I always do. Maybe I’ll sneak *into* your berth, huh, whatcha gonna do then?”

“Drag you back to medbay because Jazz, *not ready to come home.*”

Jazz glowered at him until something outside the windows caught his attention, and all at once his restless anxiety was back. “Look, you’re mad, I get that. But you’ve been mad at me before, for things so much worse than this. Can’t we argue about this later, somewhere not here? Just take me home now, please?”

“Request denied.”

Jazz’s vents fluttered, then he pasted a hopeful smile on his face. “I’ll beg real pretty, if that’s what you want. Maybe do other things too. Take me home now, and I promise I will be *very* appreciative.”

“Answer,” Soundwave said firmly, “is no.”

Jazz huffed and sat back on the berth with a thump. Helplessly he looked at Laserbeak, their silent audience in the corner. “I don’t suppose you’d like to give me an assist, LB?”

She whistled a soft negative, which Jazz seemed to understand just fine. His shoulders slumped. "Why are you being so stubborn about this?"

"Query redirected: why are you?"

Silence. To Soundwave, it seemed that rather having no answer, Jazz had too many answers to that question. He was still trying to find words when someone rapped softly at the door, and it slid aside to reveal First Aid. "Excuse me, sir," he said softly. "But my master just told me that Jazz is going to stay another night and that I should- I mean, we have to..."

He cast an agonized look at Jazz and rebooted his vocalizer. "It's time for the repaint."

So this was what had Jazz so anxious. Soundwave watched his hands curl over the edge of the berth and grip it hard. "*Verdammt*," he muttered. "*Damn it. It's not too late, we can still go. You can take me to a paint shop.*"

This time it was Soundwave that didn't answer, staring impassively at Jazz. "*You are a horrible mech, if you make Aid do this*," he added. "*Awful, cruel, gefühllos. Spark of ice. Ice formed from the remnants of moisture on an asteroid in deep space, after passing through a black hole. That is how cold you are, if you make him do this thing.*"

"This eventuality should have been considered," Soundwave answered calmly, "before display of insubordination to Megatron. Actions have consequences."

"*Dies hier*," Jazz tapped his Autobrand, "*is not my fault.*"

"That statement, subject to debate. Suggestion: query Autobot?"

He tilted his head fractionally toward the perplexed young medic, which resulted in a decidedly guilty twitch. "Jazz?" First Aid ventured hesitantly. "Did you need to ask me something?"

"Never mind. Let's go, Aid, and get this over with."

"Yes, Jazz." First Aid skirted carefully around Soundwave, and in the work of a nanoklik had the fuel line disengaged from Jazz's arm. "This way, please."

Jazz threw a scathing glare at Soundwave and fell in behind First Aid, following him out into the medbay proper. True that it was a cruel act to force the little Protectobot to do this, but Soundwave was angry enough at Jazz not to care. He should have thought of the repercussions before opening his mouth to Megatron. Absently his gaze followed them to the paint room, watching without really watching, more occupied with his own thoughts than actually paying attention to the slaves. In retrospect, he acknowledged to himself that he should have known better; he ought to have predicted Jazz would not go down without a fight.

First Aid squawked in startled pain when he hit the floor face-first. Jazz didn't miss a beat after tripping him, but skipped neatly into the paint room, slammed the door shut, and punched a series of buttons in what was probably a basic jamming short-fix.

"Jazz?" First Aid wailed. "What are you doing? Why did you- unlock the door!"

Jazz looked right past him at Soundwave, smirk absent, only watching him with a steady gaze. Probably he was waiting to see if Soundwave would come forward to override the jam and force open the door. Soundwave didn't move. After a few nanokliks, still paying no attention to the Autobot's pleadings, he uncapped the solvent bottle and doused a rag with the stuff. He bit his lip, bracing himself, then ruthlessly rubbed the rag against his own chest.

"Did somebody hit my slave?" Hook asked, wandering out of the supply room. "What was that- what the frag is your slave doing?"

Back and forth, back and forth. Most of the brand was already smeared beyond recognition, paint fading with every scrub. Beyond that first flinch, Jazz didn't break Soundwave's gaze for a moment.

"Trying to prove point," he answered. "Jazz, very stubborn."

He turned away before the deed was even done, not bothering to glance at Hook as he strode for the door. "Ensure repaint completed properly. Return, planned tomorrow."

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on surrender

More cameras had gone up, with more streams feeding into Soundwave's console. His symbiotes were staking out new patrol routes, recording more, uploading more memories into him with every synchronization. His response to the rising flood in data was to unlock more space in his own processor, hooking up new links between his own mind and his consoles to cope with the massive amounts of analysis. External relays like audial and optical were switched off, and communications on a non-emergency frequency were blocked. In self-enforced solitude, Soundwave sank into the surveillance of Cybertron. A thousand scenes played through his mind every morning, a thousand stories that demanded investigation, judgment, and sorting.

Soundwave's mind was, literally, all over the place. It slowed his personal systems to a sluggish, potentially fatal vulnerability, and effectively rendered his body useless. He would be a fool to engage in this activity anywhere but a highly secured base, behind a door he'd personally locked and encrypted. Which is exactly where he was when a second presence filtered into his consciousness, intruding on his work. Not a comm signal, not an outsider, just Buzzsaw establishing connection through the symbiotic link.

*Starscream present.*

What? Soundwave slowed one of the streams to quarter-speed, struggling to make sense of the message. Nighttime Iacon, factory workers conversing on the corners, Starscream not present. The connection was nonexistent.

He brushed aside Buzzsaw with blank indifference, but Buzzsaw persisted.

*Starscream, present now. Medbay.*

That's right, Buzzsaw wasn't a part of this data upload, these were memories drawn from Laserbeak's recorders. She had patrolled, while Buzzsaw took his turn to monitor Jazz. He was in the medbay, with Jazz, and now so was Starscream.

Soundwave was shocked into shutting down two data streams, progress unsaved, by that abrupt realization. Promptly he ordered Buzzsaw to patch his environmental audial relay into his comm, reactivating his own receptors in the meantime.

"- of the way, brat! Don't worry, this won't take long. Go polish a scalpel or something." Distantly Soundwave - through Buzzsaw - heard First Aid squeak as he was pushed aside. Then the unmistakable sounds of Starscream lounging against the doorframe in his favorite pose.

*"Jo shim heh,"* Jazz murmured softly, words meant just for Soundwave. *"Be careful. Don't react."*

It was a warning that Soundwave didn't need. Sitting perfectly still, Soundwave rerouted as much processing power as he could spare to the incoming transmission. On his end, Buzzsaw had gone warily tense, but took a cue from his master and didn't so much as snap at the intruder.

"Hello Autobot," Starscream greeted silkily. "Feeling better yet?"

"I was," Jazz answered pertly. "But for some reason the air has just gone very nasty. Filter problem, I'm sure."

"Actually, I'm surprised you're still here. Does it really take so long to heal one broken arm?" Soft clangs of metal indicated Starscream's steps across the room, moving closer to the berth. "Of course,

Autobots are so frail."

"What do you use," Jazz asked, "after Megatron's beatings? Any special balm? I imagine you must need to keep it handy."

"Generally I just override sensory input and block out all pain receptors. Too bad you can't do that. Nice look, by the way. That plain chest really doesn't suit you, does it? Fireflight, though, I find so much more attractive without that ugly symbol splattered on his wings."

*"Jazz showing signs of irritation,"* Buzzsaw warned.

"Is there something I can do for you, Starscream?"

"Oh, so many things if memory serves," Starscream purred. "But right now, I don't need you to do anything except sit there and be quiet. If you can. I'm here to talk to your master."

*"Starscream, sitting on edge of medberth,"* Buzzsaw reported, as if Soundwave could have missed the telltale metallic creaks. Through the fog of still-compiling surveillance analysis and his own diverted attention, he vaguely noticed his fingers curling against the surface of his console desk. *"Jazz, drawing back legs to avoid physical contact."*

"Well as I'm sure you can see, he's not here. He's working. You should try it sometime."

"I know he's working," Starscream said airily. "I assume that's why he's ignoring my hails at his office door. I thought if I came to you, that would get his attention. Soundwave's always looking out for his things. Proved that well enough the other day in the ghetto, didn't he?" Soundwave stiffened. "Don't think no one noticed."

*"Starscream, now watching symbiote,"* Buzzsaw said uneasily. *"Smiling."*

"Did you have something to say to Soundwave or not?"

"I just did. Oh and Soundwave, don't fool yourself that Shockwave missed it either. Who do you think suggested to Megatron that your slave might be responsible for that graffiti nonsense anyway? I'd say he painted it too, just to set you up, but we all know he doesn't have that much imagination. In any case, if you were harboring any hopes that Jazz hasn't become leverage against the great unflappable Soundwave, you can go ahead and delete them. Call it a friendly warning."

*"Starscream, now leaning closer to Jazz. Extending hand... fingertips close to contact with Jazz's head. Permission to engage?"*

*"Negative. Do not react, overt reaction desired by Starscream."*

*"Jazz, pressing back against medberth, avoiding contact. Starscream's hand, withdrawn."*

"That's all right," Starscream assured Jazz. "I can wait."

"Are you finished?" Jazz asked tersely.

"Here. Perceptor is a different story, though, I should get back to him." Buzzsaw related to Soundwave that Starscream patted Jazz lightly on the knee, grinned, and stood. By now Soundwave's hands had both curled themselves into fists; according to Buzzsaw, so had Jazz's.

"Good day, Soundwave. I do hope your slave is feeling better soon; the medbay is no place for him to live. Leave him in here too long, and some of us might think you've gotten tired of him!"

He sailed out of the room, and after a few astroseconds of quiet Soundwave unclenched his fists.

*"Geu olbaleun," Jazz muttered. "He's right. About all of it. So now can I come home?"*

His data streams had all trickled to a stop. Soundwave had diverted too much attention to Buzzsaw's comm and now his task would have to start over again, just to ensure he hadn't missed anything important while allowing Starscream to rile his temper. Irritated, Soundwave reset the programs.

*"Starscream, not relevant to my decisions for my property. And Jazz, not ready to come home. Buzzsaw, relay message."*

Grumpily Buzzsaw whistled in the negative, but whatever Jazz said in response to that went unheard. Again Soundwave switched off his comms, and reactivated analysis. There was much work to be done.

---

"Sir, your slave is ready to go home."

Halfway to the medbay exit, Soundwave found his path blocked by chief medic Hook, fists planted defiantly on hips. Somewhere behind him, he could hear First Aid scurrying into the room and pleading with Jazz to come down from the ceiling. As per usual for these visits, they had fought, and this time Jazz was threatening to wedge himself into the upper corner of the room until Soundwave took him home.

"Jazz, not yet ready. My return, planned same time next cycle."

He moved to step around Hook, and Hook moved right back into his path again.

"Ahem. I don't think you understood me, sir. I said, *your slave is ready to go home*. In fact, we're *all* ready for him to go home. He is- how do I put this politely? A demon gob hocked up from the mouth of Unicron and spit directly into my medbay. And I thought your twin brats were bad! Do you know what he did this morning, while I was out and Aid was doing inventory? He somehow found a way to break into the terminal with my medical history files, updated every Seeker's profile to name a virus caught by interfacing with Earth machinery, then uploaded the profiles onto a public server. If they hadn't started sending me angry comms by the end of the joor, I'd have never known, he covered his tracks so good. Then he sabotaged his own monitoring equipment to alert he'd died once every fifteen breems, but only for thirty nanokliks. It just about put my slave into spark seizure. I don't like my slave being put into spark seizure, Soundwave. I'm starting to understand why that glitch Skywarp kept the bot half-starved - it was the only way he could keep him under control. It beats me how you do it, but then again, I don't really care just so long as you *take him home*. I will not keep that *thing* in my medbay anymore!"

"Jazz, not yet ready to come home."

"I'm sorry, sir, but you cannot pull rank here. This is my medbay, and I have full jurisdiction over my patients. When I say someone is repaired -" Unhurriedly, Soundwave accessed his account, initiating a transfer of two thousand credits. "- he's repaired. And when I say it's time for a patient to leave, it's time for him to -" Automatically Treasury pinged the recipient for acknowledgement of receipt, and Hook faltered. "To- to... I mean, that is..."

Treasury received the acknowledgement, and the transfer took place. Hook blinked a few times,



optical light flickering in telltale distraction as he reviewed the incoming deposit.

"Well. I guess if it matters that much to you he can stay one more night. That's *one* more night, mind you; this is a medbay, not a resort."

"Terms, understood. Your cooperation, appreciated."

"So I see."

"Dismissed." This time, Hook moved aside and allowed Soundwave to exit the medbay without obstacle. He did catch Hook's muttered "dunno what you're waiting for" but did not bother to reply. It was none of Hook's concern, and anyway, Soundwave was confident that this night would be Jazz's last in the medbay. He left, returned home, and spent the evening uploading fresh surveillance footage for analysis. Two breems before the power grid was scheduled to shut down, Soundwave locked up his console, rinsed off briefly in the washracks, then entered his berth chamber. The berth was so wide and empty without Jazz in it. He lay down, lowered the lights, and waited.

Two breems after midnight, Laserbeak glided into his room and alit on his chest with a cheep. He opened up, and allowed her in.

---

*First Aid glided his hands gently over Jazz's arm, inspecting the joints for new damage and occasionally clucking with disapproval. "Jazz, I don't understand why you would do such a thing. Don't you remember that your arm was twisted and broken just a few days ago?"*

*"You fixed it. It's fine, I'm fine."*

*"No, it's not fine. The welds have put your arm back in working order, but it'll be orns before they've thoroughly set, you can't put so much stress on them this soon. Ratchet would have murdered you for that. You're lucky that Master Hook doesn't care as much about your personal welfare, or he would have too. It was a silly stunt anyway. What were you trying to accomplish by climbing up the ceiling?"*

*"I wanted Soundwave to take me home."*

*"And you thought that would do it?"*

*"No, but I thought Hook might get fed up enough to throw me out."*

*"You're that eager to go?"*

*"No offense, Aid, but this place isn't exactly my comfort zone."*

*"And Soundwave's home is?"*

*Jazz shrugged and looked away. "It's complicated."*

*"I'd expect nothing less, from you. Rotate your arm a little more please." First Aid flicked on a penlight and peered into Jazz's elbow. "You're lucky that none of these welds tore. Please promise me you won't do that again."*

*"Nothin' personal, Aid, just part of the plan. One of these days he'll have to admit that he can't leave me in here forever."*

*"So much work, to get his attention. You must miss him a lot."*

*"Goodnight, Aid."*

*"Er, yes. Goodnight, Jazz. Press the alert button if you need me." First Aid backed away, bowed to Laserbeak, then silently slipped out of the room. Huffing slightly, Jazz flopped back onto his berth and glared at the ceiling for a while. Eventually, the door swished open again and Rumble walked in.*

*"Hey, it's Munchkin Blue. Come to hang out in the cool hospital room for a while?"*

*Without replying, Rumble popped his thrusters and jumped onto the medberth, then stomped over Jazz until he was standing directly in the center of his chest.*

*"Ow," Jazz said pointedly, which Rumble just as pointedly ignored.*

*"Don't you think it's about time you apologized to Soundwave?"*

*"Ah. So he's reached the point of sending his minions to do his dirty work. Soundwave must be getting desperate."*

*"He's getting pissed, anyway. Jazz, why are you still here?"*

*"Because your master is keeping me here, or didn't you catch that?"*

*Rumble cocked his head, optic light narrowing just a little. "Our master," he corrected. "Soundwave is our master, yours just as much as mine, and he wants you to come home. We all miss you, even Ravage misses you."*

*"Oh?"*

*"Well, he misses having someone to growl at. The point is you shouldn't be here, you should be home with us."*

*"You're wastin' your vocalizer talking to me, then, you should be talkin' to Soundwave."*

*"He's not going to let you come home until you apologize! So just- apologize already."*

*"I am not going to apologize," Jazz snapped. "I didn't do anything wrong."*

*"Are you kidding? Didn't do anything wrong? We all saw what happened, Jazz, he showed us the whole thing. Why didn't you just stick your head in Megatron's cannon and tell him to flip the switch? It would have been a much quicker way to commit suicide if that's what you really wanted."*

*"I have," Jazz informed him loftily, "an obligation to resist Megatron at every opportunity."*

*"Well what about your obligation to Soundwave? What does he get? You act like he gives you jack when he tries so hard to give you everything. He feeds you, takes you on walks, buys you anything you so much as look at because he thinks it will help make you happy. He plays games with you – do you think that's his normal style? He takes really good care of you, so why throw it in his face? Why would you do this to him?"*

*“Do this to him? Whose arm got broken anyway?”*

*“One of his possessions,” Rumble answered simply. “Someone he has to protect.”*

*“And what an excellent job he did of that, carrying me to Megatron in his own arms and everything.”*

*“C’mon Jazz, you’re not stupid. You know he didn’t want to. Soundwave is Megatron’s soldier, he does what’s commanded. It’s what’s kept him alive all these vorns, and us too. He was fighting to keep you alive that day, you know that right? The things he said... scrap.” Rumble darted a quick glance back at the door to reassure himself it was closed. “I don’t think he’s ever come so close to lying to Megatron, ever. He hated having to do it, but it was to save your life. Don’t you understand how scared he was?”*

*Rumble’s voice pitched dangerously close to breaking, his tiny hands curling into fists. Annoyed, Jazz looked away. “I didn’t ask for him to be worried about me.”*

*“Well too bad, because he has to. It’s his job or wait- it’s more than that.” Frustrated, Rumble tried to grope for the right words. “It’s his core programming, Jazz. It’s the thing he was designed to do, like the way we were designed to search and record. He takes care of us, he protects us. It’s the most important thing he’ll ever do in his whole life. His kind was built to make sure our kind will survive.”*

*“Why do I keep having to point out the obvious and tell everyone that I am not a symbiote?”*

*“Don’t talk about symbiotes!” Rumble shouted hysterically. “It’s not like he didn’t try for them too! He was obeying his programming, he was trying to do his job! He took the cassettibots in, he fed them, protected them, gave them a home! It was his responsibility to make sure they survived, and they didn’t. He had to watch four symbiotes die under his care. And you knew about that! You knew what we’ve been through, what he went through. How could you make him watch that again? How could you make him relive that?”*

*Jazz flinched, in a way that had nothing to do with Rumble stomping his pede against Jazz’s chest armor. Rumble had to struggle to get control over himself, forcing closed vents that had begun to wheeze with pain. The glow in his optics was so pale it was nearly washed out.*

*“We know you don’t hate him,” he muttered. “Whatever you say, or try to pretend, we know. But even if you did hate him – which you don’t – he didn’t deserve that. He didn’t deserve to watch you try to kill yourself ten steps away, knowing he could do nothing to protect you. So you need to tell him you’re sorry, and you need to come home.”*

*Silence. For several long klicks there was nothing but the whine of Rumble’s strained systems, and the scuff-scuff as he fidgeted there on Jazz’s chest. It was impossible to read Jazz’s face.*

*“So,” he finally said. “You want me to apologize to the mech who is holding me prisoner, and slave.”*

*“... yes.”*

*“You say it with such a straight face.”*

*“Don’t start with that Autobot scrap, Jazz. You don’t even wear the symbol anymore. You’re not theirs anymore, you’re ours. You’re always fussing over those bots and trying to cheer them up, but what about us? Don’t you care about us? Primus, Laserbeak...” Helplessly he gestured to the silent symbiote. “You’re lucky you can’t hear what she’s been thinking since you wound up in this*

*medberth. She's crushed, and we all have to feel it. You're not a part of the link that we share, I get that, but you could still unshutter your optics and look. We don't want you to be hurt, why don't you feel the same about us?"*

*"Now you're hittin' low," Jazz murmured.*

*"Cassetticons always do." Rumble stiffened his shoulders defiantly. "Usually does the job. Speaking of which, I have to get back to work. There's a lot more of it, lately, and it kinda sucks. Soundwave's really pushin' himself to make Megatron happy. He knows who the first target'll be if he doesn't."*

*Rumble deliberately ground his heel against Jazz's chest as he spun around, and Jazz winced again when he fired his thrusters to jump off. He left, the door slid shut, and for a time the room was quiet again. Jazz lay still, gazing at the door, before he eventually rolled off the berth. Laserbeak's wing platelets ruffled warily when he crossed the room to her, uncertain of his intentions. Jazz, however, merely stroked a fingertip underneath her beak.*

*"How 'bout it, sweetspark?" he asked softly. "You know it was never about hurting you, right?"*

*Laserbeak trilled sadly and turned her head away. Jazz hesitated, then dropped his hand. He returned to his berth, rolled to face away, and didn't move anymore. Just before the midnight turnover, her brother arrived to relieve her, and Laserbeak flew home to report to her master.*

---

Something was different when Soundwave returned to the medbay next cycle. He sensed it well before he'd even come close to Jazz's room. Perhaps it was the way First Aid looked at him. He was in the process of mending some kind of tool as Soundwave passed, but briefly he glanced up with a flash of resentful hurt in his optics. The uncharacteristic glare struck Soundwave as being curiously familiar, until he placed it as a match to his brother's glare many deca-orns ago. The day Starscream had tried, unsuccessfully, to snatch Jazz back for the Seekers, Groove had shot him the same dirty look. After several cycles of First Aid's polite attentions, perhaps that was the noticeable difference today.

Either that, or Hook's beaming delight as he welcomed Soundwave to his medbay.

Ravage had, of course, declined to attend, so it was with just Rumble, Frenzy, and Laserbeak that Soundwave entered Jazz's room. Buzzsaw was already perched in the corner, currently monitoring Jazz, but flapped over to perch on Soundwave's shoulder with a hopeful cheep of anticipation. For his part, Jazz stayed where he was on the medberth, aimlessly kicking his legs back and forth. To Soundwave, he looked for all the world like Rumble or Frenzy after being caught in the act of a prank, and waiting to be scolded. When he looked up, a quick smile flitted across his face before vanishing.

"Hi."

"Jazz," Soundwave greeted calmly.

"How's work?"

"Plentiful."

"And the street market? Holding on without me, still?"

"Merchant activity, average."

"How sad. I shall have to get back there soon, and liven things up again." Again Jazz tried to muster up a smile, but it refused to last. "Look, Soundwave, I just want to say- that is, I need to tell you... things that I would rather not say with an audience. If you don't mind?"

He directed that last part to the symbiotes, two of whom planted their fists on hips and glared. "Anything you got to say to the boss, you can say to us," Frenzy informed Jazz, with an assenting cluck on Buzzsaw's part.

"Cassettes, dismissed," Soundwave commanded.

"Aw!" they wailed in unison.

"Now."

More than anything, cassettes did not like being left out of things, especially not things they considered important, and Soundwave got a surge of simultaneous frustration and pleading from all four at once. Soundwave stood firm, and gestured toward the open door. Sulkily they stomped out (or flew out), but once the door had swished shut they promptly grouped on the other side of the glass to watch. As a condolence, Soundwave patched his audial relay into their comms so they could at least hear, if not contribute.

"Well, that's somethin' anyway," Jazz commented wryly, looking from their riveted onlookers back to Soundwave. "Those little faceplates are gonna get stuck to the glass if they're not careful. They must think I'm going to apologize to you or something."

"Their assumption, incorrect?"

Jazz hesitated, and every one of the listening symbiotes stiffened. He seemed to be hunting for the right words to use.

"I shouldn't have to apologize to you, you know," he finally said. "You and the rest of the Decepticons are keeping me as a slave. By rights, I get to hate you and harass you for the rest of eternity."

Soundwave said nothing. Jazz's legs were still kicking back and forth.

"But, I don't hate you. I hate Megatron. I hate him for everything he stands for and everything he's done to us. He's taken so much... and destroyed whatever he didn't take. Without actually killing us, he still destroyed our lives. So I thought if I could make him tremble, and be afraid for his precious empire for even a minute, it was worth any price he made me pay. Just to see him show fear, I'd take all that pain and more."

Still Soundwave said nothing. Jazz tipped his head back, vents sighing. "What I wasn't counting into that bargain was the price that you had to pay. I know what you tried to do for Blaster's little bots. I know what you did for me. You didn't deserve a front row seat to me throwing that all away, for the sake of a cheap jab at Megatron's pride. I still say he wouldn't have killed me, but it must have been killing you to watch that. I do know you, after all. So I guess what I'm trying to say here is that I was wr- "

The word twisted inside Jazz's mouth and cut itself short, just as Soundwave's ventilations held themselves still. Mouth puckering distastefully, Jazz tried again. "Wr- wr... wrrrrr -"

"WRONG!" all his cassettes shouted into the soundproof glass, gesticulating and flapping wings in distress. Jazz probably noticed the commotion in the corner of his visor, though he gave no indication of it.

"I - was - *wrong*," he managed at last, "to hurt you that way. And I'm sorry for it. And maybe in the future, I could be more polite to Megatron." Again he made an awful face. "That's for your sake, I mean, and theirs. Not his. Not *ever* his. But for you, and all that you've done, I will... try."

His entire body shuddered, out of relief or revulsion Soundwave was not sure. "There I did it - I apologized, even though I shouldn't have to. This is me, giving in, because for some bizarre reason it bothers me more to think you're hurting than I'm losing. So fine, you win, you're winning and that's that. Soundwave eight. I hope you know how incredibly hard this was for me."

Jazz's hands were a frantic, flapping mess. In silence Soundwave watched him work himself into a small frenzy, forcing himself to say the words that must choke him within. When he finished he subsided, vents wheezing, pedes no longer kicking back and forth. Resentfully he glared at them, refusing optical contact even when Soundwave moved closer. Once, long ago, he would have flinched away from Soundwave's very presence. Now he remained still, quietly accepting the touch of Soundwave's hand cupping his face.

"Jazz, ready to come home."

---

Soundwave would never forget the rush of victory as he tumbled Jazz into his berth that night. Hands roved across armor, desperate and eager; he'd missed Jazz so much. Nothing would go untouched tonight, not with Jazz finally back home where he belonged. The onslaught left Jazz gasping with surprise and trying to squirm out from underneath, but Soundwave would have none of that. His massive weight alone was enough to keep Jazz in place, even if he'd been making a determined escape, which he was not. Soundwave had not forgotten the good spots. Palms glided over Jazz's curves and traced his favorite seams, fingertips – later glossa – delicately teasing them open. Helplessly, Jazz writhed under his ministrations. Eventually he stopped trying to escape and tried to return Soundwave's attentions in kind, bringing his own fingertips to bear on Soundwave's seams. Promptly Soundwave slammed his hands back to the berth, pinning them there just long enough to emphasize the message. Not tonight, no, this time he would not allow Jazz to control the pace. Tonight would be his alone.

Relishing the taste, Soundwave ran his glossa along Jazz's neck cables. Victory was sweet, and what a victory it had been. Soundwave was not blind to Jazz's concession, how difficult it had been for him to speak those words. Yet he'd done it anyway, for Soundwave's sake. Soundwave mattered, for the first time, more than Jazz's own pride. Jazz wanted to please him, and come home to him, and was willing to admit wrongdoing to make it happen. All this time Soundwave had kept this willful, defiant Autobot under his roof and made him obey his commands, but today marked the first real step toward truly *owning* Jazz. Someday, his control would be complete.

Jazz swallowed a moan, back arched so hard Soundwave couldn't even see his face anymore. Deeper Soundwave delved into his neck cables, licking and nibbling and trying to duplicate the experience Jazz had given him in his own office. He was at least having an effect; Jazz thrashed and moaned again, occasionally kicking against Soundwave's shins. Odd how he seemed so inclined to that. He did briefly grip the edges of Soundwave's chest armor, but then quickly slapped his own hands back down on the berth before Soundwave had to remind him of the rules. Pleased,

Soundwave nuzzled Jazz's cabling in reward. Perhaps Jazz was more tired than he thought. Perhaps he was ready, at last, to give in completely.

Jazz's armor had loosened as much as his own by now. Soundwave could sense the extreme heat trying to escape however Jazz's body could make it, fans in a frantic spin. Soundwave ground his own body against Jazz's, the gaps of his own armor subjected to the rushing heat just as much as Jazz was subjected to his. Internal temperature kicked up at least two degrees, and his systems warned of imminent overheating. Good. He could feel the electricity crackling up and down his own sensor wires, and every now and then a spark jumped from Jazz's body into his own. Energy was circulating faster than his body could expel it. Not that Soundwave had any intention of allowing it to. Again and again he thrust his body against Jazz's, electricity zinging back and forth between them, and over the thudding of his spark and high-pitched whine of fans Soundwave could just barely hear Jazz's whimpers and moans. One final electric surge was the final tipping point, and Soundwave overloaded. Every system shorted out simultaneously, pleasure wiping out his sensors in a white-hot blaze.

Soundwave collapsed onto Jazz in shuddering relief, tired but thoroughly satisfied. It took him a few nanoklicks to notice that Jazz was still burning up beneath him, fans whirring at top speed. Jazz had not overloaded with him. Surprised, disappointed, and not a little alarmed, Soundwave shifted his position and tried a little more wire tweaking. Jazz felt it, of that much he was sure, there was no way he could miss how Jazz groaned and arched his back still harder, almost curling his spinal struts back on themselves. Again Soundwave fondled the exposed wires, then teased them with his glossa. Jazz was panting severely, his vents straining to keep up, and still the heat underneath his armor burned to even hotter temperatures. For the first time, Soundwave spoke.

"Jazz, resistance unwise. Allow overload."

Jazz either couldn't hear him or – Soundwave was fairly sure – ignored him. Denta locked, fists clenched, Jazz writhed on the berth and tried to fight back his climax. So there was still defiance in him after all. Annoyed, Soundwave tickled the wires in his wrist joint, to no result.

"Jazz, proving nothing. Your refusal, meaningless. Desire, visibly obvious. Allow overload. System stress, unhealthy and possibly dangerous."

Still he was ignored. Somehow, Jazz was managing to hang back from the edge, stubbornly showing Soundwave that no Decepticon could induce him to overload. Stupid, prideful slave.

Jazz managed it, with considerable overtaxing of his fans and a large dose of sheer determination. Eventually he collapsed limply against the berth, vents croaking, his systems scorched dry. He needed coolant, quickly, and though he was tired Soundwave still had the energy to roll off the berth and draw some from the dispenser.

"Jazz, drink." He sat alongside Jazz and offered the decanter, but when Jazz reached for it with shaking hands, he pulled it back. No, Jazz should know better. Everything came to him by his master's hand. Jazz growled at him and tried to swipe at the decanter again, but Soundwave pushed his hands down and cupped his own behind Jazz's head, tipping the decanter to his lips. Light flared behind the visor in a brief glower, but Jazz was far too exhausted, and thirsty, to put up much of a fight. He opened his mouth, and allowed Soundwave to trickle in the cooling liquid. Soundwave would not let him stop until the entire decanter had been emptied.

Jazz was on the brink of shutdown when Soundwave lowered his head back to the berth, and lay beside him. He was quite tired himself, but not so much that he missed the quick, triumphant smirk on Jazz's face. Soundwave had done his best, and still Jazz could hold himself back. Complete control was still a long ways off, after all.

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“In addition to the mandated Decepticon emblem on all correspondence, we will set aside a public frequency for educational purposes. I have already tasked a committee with verbally recording our history, both political and military. The narrative will play continuously, for our subjects’ edification and inspiration, further cementing in their minds the greatness of our glorious Decepticon cause.”

Starscream fidgeted and scratched his null ray casing, vents opening in a telltale yawn. Shockwave had been droning for almost half a joor, testing even Soundwave’s patience as he meticulously described Megatron’s new propaganda campaign. Shockwave frigidly ignored the yawn, reassembling the displays on the screen to return to his original frame.

“This much, I feel, is an adequate beginning to the program. Megatron and I are confident that this will preclude anymore unfortunate ‘incidents’ like that graffiti in the slums.”

“So you do think it was a civilian,” Starscream piped up. “And not Jazz, like you were so quick to suggest to Megatron that day. Oh! And I told myself that I wouldn’t bring that up.” Regretfully he snapped his fingers. “Awkward.”

He beamed as Soundwave and Shockwave glared at one another. Shockwave stiffened his struts haughtily, more than conscious of Soundwave’s menacing stare.

“He may not have been the one holding the brush, but I am still convinced the slave had something to do with it. He’s a lying, thieving little sneak... just like all spies.”

That was a calculated slight against the small spies under Soundwave’s care, and Soundwave could feel his temper getting shorter. “Lord Megatron, now accepted Jazz not responsible,” he said coldly. “Suggestion, Shockwave accept it also.”

Shockwave’s optic glinted with hostility, obviously interpreting that last part as a threat, which it was. Soundwave did not appreciate slurs on his symbiotes anymore than he did accusations that nearly got Jazz killed.

“This is all *very* entertaining,” Starscream drawled, “but are we done here? I have a wingpaint in two breems. Maybe I’ll have them put sparkle accents on my insignias, what do you think? Would that be a worthwhile contribution to the new campaign, Premier?” He wagged his wings suggestively, which got him a disapproving glare.

“Do attempt to take this new initiative seriously, Commander Starscream. We are Lord Megatron’s three most senior officers, and it is up to us to set an example for the lower ranked, and the entire city. Utmost respect for the Decepticon cause, and its emblem, is expected at all times.”

“You don’t need to tell me to show respect for this symbol. I *did* design it, after all.”

Starscream rubbed that in with a particularly obnoxious smirk, bracing a hand against the table as he stood, but he froze when Soundwave’s hand shot out and gripped him hard on the forearm. “Excuse me?” he yipped in startled disbelief, staring at Soundwave’s hand like it was an alien organic. “Did you lose this?”

“Starscream, designed Decepticon symbol following enlistment, vorn 494.”

“Yes I know, I just said so, remember? Now kindly remove your hand from the finish, before I



finish the hand.”

Soundwave barely heard the words. All he could see in his mind was the simple archival entry filed in Aggrenet: [472v] *Sparkbeat destroyed in Decepticon attack on Iacon.*

“Director Soundwave?” Shockwave queried uncertainly. “Is something wrong?”

The first air raid on Iacon’s business district had been an early scare tactic in the revolution, designed to prove the Council had no ability – in spite of their public statements – to protect the city from Megatron’s forces. It was also, Megatron said, a just punishment against the corrupt, decadent lifestyles enjoyed there while so many mecha had to scrape for their fuel. Damage would have been more symbolic than significant if the Council's defense forces weren't so inept; they hit their own city almost as often as the Decepticons did. It was during that attack that Jazz had lost his nightclub, but that was twenty-two vorns before Starscream even joined the Decepticons, let alone designed the first Decepticon symbol.

Which meant that when Jazz said a shell bearing the Decepticon insignia destroyed his club, he was lying.

And now Soundwave wanted to know why.

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## on faith

"Do you think," Jazz asked, expression solemn and troubled, "that the mecha here have lost their appreciation for my dancing?"

Soundwave's mind had been elsewhere. He had to reroute attention to the present before he could make sense of Jazz's words, not that there was much sense to be made of them. Blankly he looked at Jazz anew.

"Query, not understood. Clarify."

"Look, you'll see." Jazz engaged in some sort of tap-step-slide move, kicking his pedes with a flourish, but drew nothing more than a glance from those nearby. "Not even a smile, let alone a whistle! Something's happened to this place in my extended absence, Soundwave, it's become too grim. Of course, it doesn't help that these chains prevent me from showing the world my real talent." Hopefully he jangled them in Soundwave's direction. "If you'd be so kind?"

"That request, not possible. Jazz knows this."

"Fiiine. But I still say something's wrong with this crowd if they won't even acknowledge Sinatra's signature step. I wouldn't mind if you paid any attention to it either. Why do I get the feeling you're not really listening to me today?" Curiously he squinted at Soundwave. "You keep giving me these funny looks. Somethin' on your mind, love?"

"Many things," Soundwave answered honestly.

"You're not still sore about the other night, are you? Don't take it personal, babe; you're not the first Decepticon who's discovered he can't bring me over the edge if I don't feel like going." Jazz smirked and turned his hand over, exposing his wrist joint. "You're welcome to have another go at any time, though. The rematch should be fun."

Impatiently Soundwave pushed his hand down. "Jazz, insolent and dangerously arrogant. Challenge, soon to be answered."

"Ooh, I did bruise your pride, didn't I? Well nut for bolt, my darling, because I wasn't going to lose two points in one day. At least we're tied again at eight, and I confidently predict that the next point will go to -"

Jazz had already laid a hand against his own chest, but he didn't get a chance to finish his unwarranted boast before Laserbeak hurtled between them, squealing in agitation. Jazz yelped and jumped backward, not even able to turn before Laserbeak swooped a tight circle around him and threw herself at Soundwave, wings flapping and claws scrabbling rather painfully against his armor to secure her perch. She'd wandered off a little while earlier, but Soundwave had barely noted the muting of her end of the link. Now it was bursting with panic and upset and, worryingly, guilty dread.

"What the -" Jazz tried to say and was again interrupted, this time by a shouting groundpounder flanked by two lawkeepers. Soundwave was instantly displeased to note that both rifles were primed and ready to fire, barrels pointed at his smallest symbiont. Carrier protocols unlocked, protective instincts surging to his own weapons and prepping them for action. Shoulder rifle humming, he turned to face the oncoming trio.

"Threat of assault, displayed. Orders: stand down immediately and lower weapons. Alternative,

severe punishment."

Every one of them screeched to a halt when they recognized him and the symbol on his chest, the lawkeepers hastily lowering their guns and the grounder's optics blanching to almost pure white. He gasped, and promptly dropped to his hands and knees.

"My lord! I beg your pardon, I did not realize. The little one on your shoulder stole several items from my merchandise and I gave chase, not knowing -"

"Laserbeak, a Decepticon and soldier to Lord Megatron. Threat of violence against her, considered possible treason."

"My lord, I did not know!" He shivered and touched his brow plating to the street again. "I swear I didn't know. I didn't see the sigil, I only saw her snatch my property and fly away. I chased her only to retrieve my things, and shouted for help from enforcement. They did not tell me I was chasing a Decepticon!"

At that Soundwave's attention moved to the two lawkeepers, who took a nervous step back. "I beg your pardon, sir, we also did not realize. We didn't see the Decepticon emblem on her wings, she was flying very fast."

Soundwave narrowed his gaze menacingly at the pair. "Laserbeak, prized courier and reconnaissance agent for Decepticon army. Suggestion: law enforcement become familiar with the appearance of Lord Megatron's Decepticons. Ignorance, possibly fatal mistake."

"Yes sir," they muttered, resentfully hunching their shoulders. "Won't happen again, sir."

"How shall we report this in our logs, sir?"

At that moment Soundwave became acutely conscious of the attention that their commotion had attracted. Almost everyone on the street had drifted closer, and now they had the audience that Jazz had been wishing for moments earlier. It was an audience Soundwave didn't want, these two lawkeepers especially. They were under Shockwave's jurisdiction, and this incident was bound to get back to him. News that one of Soundwave's symbiotes had been caught stealing in the market would be the perfect public embarrassment, after Soundwave's public confrontation with Shockwave about this place. Shockwave would only be too happy to use this incident against him; Decepticons were immune from the city's civilian law enforcement, but not from Megatron's judgment. Laserbeak's timing couldn't have been worse.

She sensed his exasperation and cringed, sidling off Soundwave's shoulder and dropping on to Jazz's instead. In shame she tucked her head under a wing. He could still see the trophy, or rather trophies, of her theft fluttering in the grasp of her beak. She'd made off with several sheets of brightly colored foils, unsurprisingly. Laserbeak had always had a weakness for shiny things. So did Buzzsaw, but at least he put common sense before the urge to snatch and grab.

He extended his hand. "Laserbeak, relinquish stolen property."

"Oh no, my lord!" The merchant bobbed his head up and down. "A Decepticon is always welcome to anything of mine, at any time. I gladly give them up for your pleasure."

Laserbeak cheeped hopefully, but Soundwave ignored them both. "Theft, unacceptable in post-war marketplace," he said firmly, for the sake of all listening audios. "Property will be returned."

Laserbeak whined and shrunk back from his hand, and Jazz stroked her wings sympathetically. "Have a spark, Soundwave. Look at that face. Couldn't you at least buy them for

her?"

"Laserbeak's habit, not to be encouraged. Punishment, still to be decided. Relinquish property now."

Her pleading unsuccessful, Laserbeak finally sighed and gave up her prize. Jazz helped glide the stack of foils out of her beak, then handed them over to the stunned merchant.

"My lord! Your generosity is too much for a simple mech like myself, I do not deserve -"

"This conversation finished," Soundwave said irritably. "All dismissed, now."

The vendor looked like he wanted to gush some more, but was more frightened of Soundwave than grateful, so he settled for shuffling back with many a bow before he disappeared back around the corner. The two lawkeepers saluted, whirled around, and marched away. Their audience dispersed too, whispering among themselves.

"Gossiping," Jazz predicted, "about the Decepticon who refuses to steal. I know, I can hardly believe it either. Wish you'd show half as much consideration for *my* rights."

"Actions taken to avoid embarrassment with Premier Shockwave. Such an incident, unfavorable in present conditions. Laserbeak knows this." He loomed closer, and Laserbeak scuttled around to Jazz's other shoulder. Wave after wave of *sorry/accident/irresistable* was rolling across their link, while she worked up her most contrite posture.

"*Theft, unnecessary,*" he pointed out. "*Credit allowance, extensive.*"

"*Habit,*" she answered guiltily. "*Target sighted, dive executed, successful extraction exciting.*"

"*War, finished. More consideration expected. Think first, dive second.*"

"*Yes, master.*" She shuffled her claws on Jazz's armor. "*Apology extended. Trouble for you, never desired. My actions, thoughtless and possibly harmful.*" She trilled sadly and dropped her gaze. It was a pose calculated to soften Soundwave's irritation, but it worked far more effectively on Jazz.

"Aw, poor little sweetspark, look at how bad she feels. Soundwave, stop making her cry."

Soundwave had to divert a nanoklik's worth of processor attention to the human word 'cry', and while he was distracted Laserbeak nuzzled Jazz for more pity. "You know it breaks my spark to see you with such a long face. Give us a smile, now." Playfully he tickled her under the beak. "Still nothing? Well, maybe if I try here." He moved his fingertips to just behind her left wingstrut. "No? Well how about... here?"

His hand moved to her right wing, but instead of tickling anything, he darted his hand back and flashed into existence a bright red sheet of foil. "Well look at what I found! How do you suppose that got back there?"

Laserbeak's spark lit up with delight, but she promptly shrunk back against Jazz when she felt Soundwave's displeasure. "Jazz -"

"Oh c'mon, Soundwave, don't be such a killjoy." Jazz waved a dismissive hand, metallic red flashing under the lamplights. "It's one sheet, not worth even half a credit, and that vendor would probably keel over if you track him down to pay it. Nobody's even going to notice it's gone."

Soundwave wondered how Jazz had even managed to slip the one sheet away without anyone

noticing, without access to his subspace. It must be a well-practiced technique of his. Soundwave eyed Jazz curiously. "Inclination to steal, not generally compliant with Autobot propaganda."

"That was Prime's brochure," Jazz said easily, back to tickling Laserbeak under her beak. "Every army has to have the one mech willing to do the dirty work. Look at Starscream."

While Soundwave was filing that away for later consideration, Laserbeak's gaze settled back on Soundwave. Those optics had gone bright red with pleading hope, and her side of the link glowed with tentative anticipation.

"No," Soundwave said firmly. "Laserbeak deserves punishment now, not reward. This habit, not to be encouraged."

*"Actions, not to be repeated! Please? Only one remains. Task, very quick."*

"Answer is no."

"What's going on?" Jazz complained. "What am I being left out of?"

"Laserbeak, desires treat," Soundwave answered shortly. "Treat, undeserved."

Laserbeak looked crushed, but the posture was an act; her end of the link was still radiating hope. *"Please please please!"*

"No."

*"Pleeeeeease?"* Words dissolved into images and memories, seeping into Soundwave's mind without invitation. She had been so much younger, then, squirming with delight in spite of the pain. Such an innocent little creature she'd been... once. The centuries had since taught her to be devious. Her fierce hope wrapped around him, hope that was well-placed because Laserbeak knew his weaknesses. Because of the manner in which she came to his household, Soundwave had always been a little more protective of her. They all were.

"Favor granted," he relented. "Expectation: no repeat of theft in marketplace."

*"Understood!"* Overjoyed, she hopped up and down on Jazz's arm, then leaped onto him to nip and tug at his wires. Partly exasperated, partly amused, and grudgingly affectionate, Soundwave allowed her to express her enthusiasm and ruffled her wingplatelets a little in return. When he looked up, Jazz was sitting on an overturned crate a few steps away, chin on one knee as he watched them. A soft, fond smile was clinging to his lips, though he covered it with a flippant grin when Soundwave looked.

"This must really be somethin' special, to get her worked up like this. Enough with the suspense already, what does she want?"

"Demonstration, forthcoming." Soundwave sat next to Jazz, waving away Laserbeak when her wing flapping became too much to ignore. "Foil sheet, required."

Looking more curious by the nanoklik, Jazz handed it over. It hadn't been too badly wrinkled, and that only in the one corner. The old subroutine kicked to life as he began smoothing it out, calling on patterns he hadn't thought about in vorns.

"Laserbeak, heavily injured upon introduction to home," he explained. "Damage, severe. Ability to survive, not entirely certain."

"Who hurt her?"

"War," Soundwave answered simply. "Origin of plasma round, unclear. Shot probably accidental, but nearly fatal. Extensive surgery required for almost every strut, left wing required total reconstruction. Laserbeak, immobile for several lunar cycles."

"Poor thing." Jazz stroked his fingertips along the lines of Laserbeak's wings, but she didn't glance up from Soundwave's hands.

"Long convalescence, frustrating and difficult for cassette model. Their programming, designed to explore and discover. Frustration for flight-capable cassette, doubly so. For sake of amusement and entertainment, sometimes engaged in current task. Patterned folding, a simple enough program. Laserbeak enjoys watching work in progress."

Smoothly Soundwave's fingers worked as he spoke, turning and folding according to the dictates of a basic pattern. Once, he'd been accustomed to far more complicated projects, but it had been a long time and this was enough. There was something quite appealing in the way Jazz's gaze was so riveted on his work, every bit as fascinated as the little symbiont on his lap. Not a little amused himself, Soundwave put the finishing touch on his project and held it up on his palm. Long ago, before the war, folding metallic sheets into beautiful patterns had been a form of high art. To present one was to give a token of strong affection. Now that he'd spent some time on organic worlds, Soundwave noted that this pattern strongly resembled some alien flora. Light flashed and sparkled against the many facets, creating an illusion of fire.

"Wow," Jazz breathed, leaning closer to inspect it without touching. "That's *beautiful*. You're amazing."

He looked up, visor flushing a brighter blue when he realized what he'd just said. "I mean- who'd have thought it? A Decepticon who can make something pretty instead of just stepping on it. Wonders will never cease."

Pleased with Jazz's reaction, Soundwave moved to offer the finished project to Laserbeak. She was cooing happily on Jazz's lap, smugly content that she'd gotten her way after all, but at Soundwave's gesture she turned her head aside. Perplexed, Soundwave offered it again. Laserbeak had never allowed them to throw away a completed work, not ever. Inevitably, they'd all long since been destroyed by the havoc of constant war. This was her first in peacetime and she didn't want it?

Impatiently she pecked at Jazz's arm. "Ow! What?" She pecked again, gesturing impatiently to Soundwave's hand. "What, you want me to carry it for you?"

Laserbeak clucked something brusque and gestured at Soundwave's hand again, digging her claws into Jazz's legs to carry home the point. "Owww. Alright, alright, I'm taking it." Gently Soundwave tipped it onto Jazz's palm, and a pleased Laserbeak bumped her head against Jazz's chest. Now Jazz finally got the hint.

"Oh. It's... for me. Are you sure Soundwave's alright with that?" A bit startled and slightly uneasy, Jazz looked at Soundwave, who made sure to keep his posture impassive.

"If desired, present yours. Pattern, easily accomplished."

"Then I guess I have no choice but to accept." Gingerly Jazz cradled the metal flower in his hand. "Thank you, uh, Laserbeak."

"Laserbeak indicates acceptance of gratitude."

"Okay then." Jazz smiled broadly, covering up some other expression that Soundwave didn't quite see. "Shall we get going?"

"Affirmative."

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*"...and so our Lord Megatron, demonstrating his great military genius, was able to outmaneuver the attacking troops. His appearance of retreat lured the foolish Autobots deeper into Tyger Pax, while flanking soldiers closed in from both sides. Outmatched and confused, the Autobot strategist could barely engineer an escape, ceding an important victory and all the territ-*"

Soundwave hesitated on the threshold when he saw Jazz slumped into a kneeling position by the twins' entertainment console, absorbed in the broadcast, but Jazz heard him anyway. Quickly his hand swiped at the tuning buttons, flipping from the quiet historical narrative to a thumping club beat that filled the room.

"Ah, now that's what I was looking for!" Jazz shot him a dazzling, entirely fake, smile. "Not the greatest mixing I've ever heard, true, but at least it's music. Whoever heard of just listening to *talk* on a broadcast anyway? You can't even dance to it. What's the point?"

Not in the least bit fooled, Soundwave entered the room. "Jazz, upset by new programming?"

"Please," Jazz scoffed. "As if that half-boiled batch of propaganda would bother me. I mean, Shockwave wrote it, and his ten-breem daily reports are boring enough. This is supposed to cover the entire war? The only thing this new project is going to inspire amongst the cityfolk is *naptime*."

Light rolled behind his visor, and Jazz scrambled across the floor towards their hax set. "So, are we ready to play? I've got my next move all mapped out."

"Affirmative."

Soundwave switched off the music and sat down, politely ignoring Jazz's obvious distress. He had heard a good bit of the new programming already, noting the omission of some facts and the exaggerated depiction of Autobot incompetence. It was only to be expected that Jazz would be upset by it. They began their daily round of hax in silence, at least three breems passing by without comment from either of them. When Soundwave was sure that Jazz had relaxed, and turned his concentration completely to the game, he finally spoke.

"Jazz, believer in Primus?"

Jazz looked up sharply, visor flashing white with surprise, and laughed a little. "Now what kind of question is that, all of a sudden?"

"Question, one of curiosity. Answer it."

Light glowed subtly in a way that Soundwave knew meant Jazz was scrutinizing him, trying to deduce the meaning behind the question. More obviously, he grinned and relaxed back into his seat. "Oh Soundwave. Surely by now you've figured out that I'm not the religious type. It, ah, doesn't mix well with my particular lifestyle."

"Tradition states that Primus incarnated into relic Matrix. Matrix then chooses mortal carrier,

accordingly anointed as Prime. Your leader. Yet, Jazz not religious?"

Jazz shrugged. "You can believe that our god and starter force bottled himself up into a chunk of glass if you want to - and I was under the impression most Cons didn't - but I don't go for those fairy tales. I'm a practical sort of mech, you know? I believe what I see with my own optics, what I touch with my own fingertips. Nothing else." He tapped two of those fingertips against the edge of his visor, then pointed them at Soundwave. "Now, why the interest? You thinkin' about getting religious, Soundwave? Megatron won't like that. I recall a lot of shouting about Primus and the crimes he committed against our planet."

"Negative, your recollection mistaken. Megatron merely unhappy with theocratic bias in Cybertronian government. Temples to Primus, entrusted with too much power and easily corrupted."

"Maybe." Jazz's tone was flat, indifferent, and Soundwave wasn't sure whether he agreed or didn't care enough to argue the point.

"Theocratic appointment of leader, undemocratic and without recourse to alternatives. Primes, appointed for life and often inclined to abuse their powers. Population's general habit of obeying Prime without question, dangerous and careless. Their obedience rooted in faith, therefore illogical. Mecha follow Prime only because he is Prime."

"I know that Megatron said so," Jazz spoke up impatiently, "but Megatron only ever saw what he wanted to see. If he'd bothered to ever actually look at Optimus, if he'd ever bothered to talk to him, he would have known that Optimus was different. He didn't see himself entitled to the world, just because of the title he carried. He fought the Council on so many policies, I think they hated him more than they hated Megatron. He wasn't like the rest of the government; every Autobot knew that. I never followed Optimus because he was the Prime - I followed him *in spite* of the fact that he was Prime."

"Why?" Soundwave pressed. "Autobot forces inferior on multiple counts: smaller numbers, limited military supplies, almost no military experience."

"Still better than the alternative," Jazz said lightly, gesturing to the Decepticon symbol on Soundwave's chest.

"Decepticon strategies in war, superior."

"I get that that's the official line, these days, but you know as well as I do that Shockwave's new broadcast is missing a few details here and there."

"Acknowledged. However, Jazz must admit Autobots did lose war."

His slave hunched his shoulders, a touch of resentment flashing across his visor. "Yeah. I'll admit that."

"Megatron, possessed qualities of efficient leader. Authoritative, confident, and willing to accept collateral damage as price of victory. Unilateral decision maker in Decepticon army, willing to make choices and take action without permission or consensus of lower officers."

"That's why you followed him."

"Affirmative. Optimus Prime, constrained by demands of those weaker. Unwilling to sacrifice soldiers for victory, or to override disagreement from officers. Megatron's response time, inevitably faster than Optimus."



"Doesn't make him a better leader."

"Not better," Soundwave corrected. "More efficient. Megatron, always more efficient, therefore, Decepticon victory inevitable."

Jazz stared at him, then dropped his gaze to the hax set, thinking hard. "Efficient," he repeated softly. "That's... a different way of looking at it, I guess. You're right about that much: he was the more efficient leader, and the Decepticon strategy was superior. Especially right there at the end, after he got the hang of human politics. Megatron was very smart about it. When he made Optimus choose between fighting the humans and losing the war, it was all over. I begged him to ignore that new government of theirs. Begged him to take just a little more fuel than they were willing to trade, begged him not to turn over every one of our defense codes just because they'd made a law that said we had to. He listened, because he always listens, but he wouldn't agree. He couldn't set himself above their laws, he said, it wasn't 'right'. Wasn't what the Matrix wanted. Always it had to be that fragging Matrix. If Primus really is inside that thing, then I say *fuck* Primus for getting my leader killed."

Jazz slapped his hand hard on the table, knocking over one of the hax pieces. Cold blue light flared behind the visor. "Have I answered your question yet? Whatever it is?"

Startled, Soundwave realized he'd lost control of this data gathering session. It was only supposed to be a gentle probe into Jazz's motivation to join the Autobots, but instead he'd triggered hostility and suspicion. All he'd learned was that he could at least eliminate any reasons of holy fealty.

"Apology extended," he said, surprising Jazz for a second time. "Your distress, not desired. Questions, fueled only by curiosity." Carefully he returned the fallen hax piece to its rightful square, trying to appear as nonthreatening as possible. Jazz looked bewildered, and still very upset, but he did subside back into his chair.

"Thought it was the little ones' job to be curious."

"My task, to learn everything about my possessions."

Jazz smiled wanly. "Oh Soundwave. You'll never learn everything there is to know about me."

"Perhaps. Intention, however, is to keep trying." Decision made, Soundwave moved another of his pieces deeper up into Jazz's territory. "Come. Now, time for walk."

He stood and extended his hand, and was profoundly relieved when Jazz placed his in it. At least no permanent damage had been done. He would, in the future, pursue other methods of research.

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## on music

Ravage ejected, twisting and transforming in one fluid motion before he landed on the back of Soundwave's console. The space should have been too small for him, but wasn't, which said something for his well-practiced agility. Poised neatly above the screens, tail twitching with agitation, his end of the link flooded Soundwave's with another burst of concern. He wasn't wrong. For some while Ravage had been growing steadily more upset about the state of things in lower Iacon, but this was his first chance to present evidence of a specific problem, and the results were troubling. Soundwave accepted Ravage's concern with full respect, but assuaged it with reminders of firm Decepticon rule. A little corruption amongst the civilian lawkeepers was not going to bring down Megatron's hard-won empire.

"Further consideration required," Soundwave informed him. "Analysis will be conducted at Decepticon Headquarters. Hasty reaction, not desirable."

Ravage bared his fangs, fleeting images of how he'd like to deal with the problem skittering through Soundwave's mind. "Not politically feasible," he reminded his symbiont dryly. "Ravage knows this. Departing now, Ravage will remain here with Jazz."

Fangs showed themselves again, more prominently, and accompanied by a loud hiss of displeasure. Soundwave ignored him and stood, locking down his console at the same time. "Argument, unnecessary and fruitless. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, recharging within. Rumble and Frenzy, working in Command Center. Ravage, only symbiont remaining."

Ravage snarled and bounded out of the office in front of Soundwave, deliberately looking straight at the corner where Soundwave had stationed his security camera. Absorbed in a game on his datapad, Jazz looked up at the sudden movement.

"Personal supervision, still preferred. Slave left to his own devices often creates trouble."

"I can actually hear you, you know," Jazz pointed out. "I take it that Mittens is getting stuck with slave-sitting today? Don't be such a cranky-bolts, little kitty, I promise to roll up balls of foil for you to chase."

Ravage snarled at Jazz, and got a kiss blown at him in response. More protest rolled across the link, which Soundwave dismissed. Ravage was perfectly capable of being in the same room as his slave, he just resented the chore of supervision. Soundwave unsnapped three separate energon treats to feed to Jazz, not knowing exactly how long he'd be gone. Jazz rolled up onto his knees to eat them out of Soundwave's hand, one after another, talking through a mouthful of fuel.

"You know, we could spare Ravage a lot of complaining if you'd just take me to work with you. I wouldn't be any trouble. I wouldn't even ask to see the other bots. I just want -"

"Jazz, remains here. Concentration required in office. My return, soon enough; your good behavior expected in meantime." He traced his thumb lightly over one of Jazz's audial sensors, knowing that Jazz would twitch and flick his head in reflex, which he found endearing. Jazz and Ravage sighed identical defeated sighs, shot a quick glare at each other, and retreated back into their daily activities. Jazz went back to his game, and Ravage curled up in a pouty ball at the end of the couch. Since that was as close to peace as these two would ever come, Soundwave left reasonably satisfied.

He used his thrusters to cover the distance, and reached Headquarters in only a breem. Long Haul and Scrapper were just coming out as he entered the building, Grapple trotting along at their heels,

and Long Haul hailed him with an overly loud greeting.

"Hey, Soundwave! I'm a little hungry and short on credits - could you have one of your birds steal me a snack?"

Soundwave fixed him with a frosty look just long enough to make him gulp, then continued on to his office. He was doing his best to fulfill his unspoken promise to Megatron by coming here to work, but there were many moments, such as this one, that he still wished he didn't have to. He keyed open his office door, and entered it to find both twins at his console, anything but working.

"Oh hey, boss."

"What's up?"

"Rumble, Frenzy, in Headquarters to work, not play games."

"C'mon, Soundwave, Megatron gets to take breaks. Shockwave takes breaks. What are we, the only two Cons in the whole building that don't get to take a break?"

"Yeah, not all of us live for work, remember?"

"That's just you."

"If twins have time for games, time for extra investigative research possible. Certain task, necessary."

Neither twin lifted his gaze from the screen. "Is this World of Warcraft-related?"

"Your attention, required." Impatiently Soundwave switched off their game, which provoked indignant yelps.

"Hey!"

"We were questing that!"

"Hush." Soundwave plucked them off his chair and set them on the flat edge of his console. "Sole use of this office necessary for surveillance analysis now. Rumble and Frenzy, needed to investigate different subject. Many questions regarding Jazz's past still require answers."

Petulant about being interrupted in their game, the twins shot him sulky looks. "Are you still losing sleep over that one thing Jazz said?"

"Primus, Soundwave, who cares? It was, like, a million vorns ago that Jazz joined the Bots. The war's over and done with. What does it matter why he did?"

"That question, crucial. War finished; reason should be inconsequential, but Jazz still lied. Therefore, reason important. No intention of allowing this to go without investigation. Your task, research reasons why any Cybertronian does not have publicly listed sparking date."

Rumble and Frenzy heaved martyred sighs, their shoulders slumping. "I thought the big mystery was why he joined the Autobots."

"Correct. However, many unexplained gaps and inconsistencies in Jazz's history. Information to answer one question may be valuable clue to another. Jazz mine; knowledge of his origins should also be mine. Your assistance, greatly appreciated."

"Good, because it's obviously not *voluntary*."

"Dismissed. Concentration required now."

The grumbles went ignored. Soundwave released his data cables and began jacking into the console, unlocking Ravage's data for analysis. There was still so much work to be done.

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"I don't care what that jerk says, I was not dancing on his personal sidewalk," Jazz declared to everyone, which at present was only Soundwave, as they entered his loft. "I know he paid through the ailerons to Shockwave for that shop, but that doesn't make his upgrades better, it doesn't make his window any prettier, and it most definitely does not cover ownership of the walkway in front of said window. He should be thanking me for drawing attention to that pile of scrap. Upgrades, hah. More like downgrades. He probably contaminated me with his cheap wax when he shook that brace at me."

Distastefully he ran a fingertip down the length of his forearm, then checked it. "Hmph. Well, it could have happened. It's still not his walkway." He stood still long enough for Soundwave to remove his cuffs, then continued flouncing toward the washracks. He'd made it to the threshold before he noticed that Soundwave was not following, though it was their usual practice to rinse down after Jazz's daily walk.

"Don't you want to wash?"

"Soon. First, something else desired." Expectantly he stood by the end of the couch, watching Jazz, who nodded when he understood.

"Ah. I get it. It's time for everyone's favorite multiple choice quiz, when you ask me if it's A) berth or B) couch, even though we all really know the answer is C) your lap."

"Jazz, not required to join me." Soundwave sat down, watching Jazz's visor flash white with surprise and confusion.

"I'm not?"

"Negative." He produced a datapad and unlocked it. "Your presence, unnecessary. Merely intending to review reconnaissance regarding Iacon's black market." For good measure, he added, "Some discrepancies, troubling."

Jazz's gaze promptly focused on the datapad in his hands with a hungry gleam, and he craned his head to see better. "Black market recon, really? Is it juicy?"

"That description, meaningless. However, gathered data could properly be described 'interesting'."

Temptingly Soundwave tipped the pad just far enough to let Jazz see the edge of the screen. His slave was practically quivering to come closer. "Jazz, curious?"

"You're a cunning, manipulative fiend."

"Jazz, not one to speak."

"Hush, and lemme see." Jazz gave in at last, crossed the distance between them, and tried to swipe it

out of his hand. Soundwave drew it back, out of Jazz's reach, forcing him to lean close. Warm dermal plating brushed against his, Jazz's diamond-hard visor almost bumping against his own. He could feel the dip in the couch as Jazz braced a knee against the cushion, alongside his own leg, and his hand as he grasped at Soundwave's outstretched arm. Though Jazz's face was too close to his own to properly see, Soundwave sensed his smile. Jazz knew exactly what he was up to, and didn't seem inclined to fight him on it. His sparkbeat carried through their chest plates as they touched.

His smaller hand finally managed to close over the edge of the datapad. "Ha, got it. Let's find out if your bait was worth it." Soundwave didn't let go of the datapad, lest Jazz try to escape his lap, but he did allow Jazz to pull it back down to his own level. Perched somewhat-sideways over his thigh armor, Jazz bent over his prize and started reading.

"So Ravage says the black market is getting a lot of lawkeeper visitors... but not a lot of arrests."

"Appropriate licensing database examined," Soundwave added. "Few permits granted since Premier's city-wide sweep. All businesses in black market, presumed still illegal."

Jazz looked up from Ravage's surveillance and grinned with a resigned sort of air, shrugging his shoulders. "So the keeps are going in to collect bribes. Ah, that's just the way of the world, Soundwave. Every world, in fact. Even Prowl couldn't stamp it out when he was commissioner, and if Prowl couldn't, then Blitzwing and Astrotrain aren't going to bend their bolts over a few corrupt -"

"No," Soundwave interrupted. "Read. Ravage also overheard this." With one finger he scrolled past Ravage's detailed time-stamps of lawkeepers' stops at the illegal merchants, which were numerous, to the next relevant piece of data. He pointed, and Jazz's gaze followed. He knew when Jazz found it by the pale light washing across his visor, and the way his mouth fell open in astonishment.

"John Paul George and Ringo!" he breathed. "The lawkeepers only earn two cubes of fuel an *orn*? They can't survive on pittance like that. Even the Autobots get fed more than that; even Skywarp gave me more than *that*."

"Affirmative," Soundwave concurred. "Lawkeepers, paid starvation wages. However, lawkeepers not starving."

"It's not just a few bribes." Jazz let the datapad drop. "It's their whole income. Protection money from the unlicensed vendors is what's keeping them fed. Keeping them *alive*."

"Jazz's assessment, likely correct."

"So, Shockwave's managed to build a system in which the vendors have to pay the keeps to stay in business, assuming they can't afford one of his expensive permits. And the lawkeepers have to keep the vendors from getting arrested, just to put cubes on the table. They don't want to arrest them, but they don't want the laws to be taken off the books either, because merchants that go from being illegal to legal don't have to pay extortion money. Everything is balanced just so, and one tiny slip from this side to the other spills the whole tray... and there goes everybody's energon." Jazz wobbled his hand in demonstration. "Oh, Premier Shockwave, what have you done? How did he even get away with it? Doesn't Megatron know what the lawkeepers are getting paid?"

"Negative. Such a detail, small and irrelevant for Lord Megatron."

"Don't they ever complain? Or just leave the slagsucking job for good?"

"Complaints, recorded by symbiotes," Soundwave assured him. "Leaving lawkeeper employment, however, unlikely. Status very high, in spite of low pay. Considered most likely career to attract attention of Decepticons, and enhance possibility of Decepticon recruitment. Also, fear of surrounding community an attractive bonus. Lawkeepers, command significant subservience from fellow civilians. If low wages can be supplemented with extortion payments, then position on force ideal. Not given up lightly."

"You have to tell Megatron. More importantly, you have to let me be there when you tell Megatron, right in front of Shockwave. I wanna see the look on that thing he calls a face when you rat him out."

Soundwave shook his head. "Cannot report this to Lord Megatron. Not now."

"What? Why not?"

Unhappily, Soundwave remembered that brief nighttime meeting in his leader's home, and the warning glower in his optics. "Megatron, displeased with officers' interpolitics. Especially displeased with my criticism of some policies."

Jazz straightened, surprised. "You criticized him?"

"Megatron, protective of empire and its successes," Soundwave went on to say, ignoring Jazz. "Not receptive to dissent, particularly dissent perceived to be only bickering between officers. His instructions, clear. My task, not to evaluate his rule, but to seek treason."

"Then why did you collect all this?"

"Discovering and recording information, my purpose. Basic directives, impossible to ignore."

A thoughtful noise hummed somewhere in Jazz's vocalizer, optical light narrowing with scrutiny. "Come now, lover, nobody's that pure. Not even you. I think you're waiting for just the right opportunity to tip this hand."

"Perhaps."

"You're good at this game, aren't you? You wield secrets like weapons."

"Jazz, cannot begin to guess."

Idly Soundwave stroked his thumb along the dermal line just beneath Jazz's visor, which provoked another mild reverberation in his throat. Jazz leaned slightly into the touch, the glow in his visor brightening. Along the upper cheek ridge his thumb moved, then swept down along the jaw, and underneath to the neck. He brushed a sensor wire, and heard the flutter in Jazz's vents. His slave was holding himself quite still, not trying to scramble free. And not, Soundwave noted with satisfaction, kicking at his shin armor. He glided his fingertips down the sensor wire again, lightly, hardly more than a tickle, but more than enough to draw a response from such a sensitive area. Jazz twitched, and raised his chin for better access.

Ah, this was good. Jazz was being compliant, and receptive to his touch, not fighting to get away nor trying to take control with his own talents. He'd learned his lessons, and that called for a reward. Soundwave moved to another wire, teasing it even more fitfully, watching the way that blue optical glow flushed and brightened with every successful stroke. Up and down along its length he went, or at least as far as he could go before that interfering slave collar got in his way. Jazz's ventilations came in shorter, faster bursts, and his hands gripped at the edges of Soundwave's chest armor to keep from toppling off his lap. That sensation alone was enough to trigger a spike in Soundwave's core

temperature, even though he was supposedly giving and not receiving pleasure. Marvelous, what Jazz could do to him...

Jazz's temperature, from what he could feel under his hand, was not accelerating toward overload. That disappointed Soundwave but he would not press the issue, not now, when Jazz was being so good. He wondered if it was a show of gratitude for freely sharing classified information with him, or if Jazz was simply in the mood, but there was no way to know. Nor did Soundwave particularly care to know. Instead he fondled the wires in Jazz's neck one last time, throwing in a final tweak and pinch, and withdrew his hand. Still humming small moans of pleasure, Jazz collapsed against his chest and lay there quietly for a few nanokliks. After his ventilations had normalized, he tilted his head up enough to nuzzle gently against Soundwave's own neck.

"That was pretty good," Jazz murmured, "luring me into your lap like that. Well played."

"Acknowledged. Worth a point?"

"Come on, now. It's not like I didn't know what was going on, right?" Jazz pushed himself more upright, flashing a terribly cheeky grin at Soundwave. "Race you to the washracks."

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*[v450.561] Megatron led Decepticon attack on First Holy Temple of Altihex. Siege lasted .653 orn. Victory, due largely to surprise assault, successful sniping of temple sentries, and insufficient barricades to entrance. Decepticon Blitzwing responsible for leveling entrance gate and allowing access to Commander Megatron. Decepticon mortality count: 0%, Temple defenders: 100%. Temple found with standard access to Vector Sigma, six deca-orns' supply in energon, 156,000 in untraceable credits, and three large rooms filled with valuable artifacts. [partial audio file: Megatron speaking after victory] Listen? y/n*

*Y - "...sts speak of vows to poverty, but this is what we find in their secret halls! The priests speak of their duty to Primus, but these riches prove they feel no duty but to themselves! What thrived behind these supposedly sacred walls was not worship, but sordid business. These treasures are corroded with the rust of greed. Ask yourself what it was payment for, Cybertronians! What did the servants of Primus trade away for piles of trinkets and metals? What did the filthy rich mecha of our planet need so badly that they could pay this but not a few more chips to their workers? Holy privileges are for sale in our temples, whatever the distant Council might insist, and we speak no deception to say so! The proof is all around us! And I will not rest unti-" [file corrupted, end file]*

"Director Soundwave?"

He withdrew his jack from the console and looked up to find Shockwave on the threshold, looking a little taken aback. The military archives, classified to the Decepticon officers only, were rarely accessed and mostly forgotten, here on the third level of the Command Center. General history had already been uploaded to Aggrenet by Soundwave vorns ago, but images, sound files, and other tiny fragments of the revolution's history stayed here, on hard data chips, waiting to be explored. He'd organized these vorns ago too, but not reviewed them individually, especially not those that predated even his entry into the war. Shockwave had not initiated contact for another six vorns after the attack on the temple.

That particular mech settled back on his heels, hand clasped to the other wrist across his significant middle. "How unexpected, to meet you here. Enjoying a few history lessons?"

“Gaps in Aggrenet require repair,” Soundwave answered truthfully. “Pre-war history, still lacking in details.”

“How proactive of you. You must have been inspired by my new broadcasting project, yes?”

“Broadcasts, not heard. My time commitments, considerable.”

Shockwave deflated a little, optic flickering in what was his version of a scowl. “I see. No doubt your perambulations in the commercial district require more attention. Er, how is your little flying servant, by the way? Got enough toys to keep herself entertained?”

“Reminder: all items paid for,” Soundwave answered coolly. “Discipline for symbiote, my prerogative and jurisdiction.”

“Of course. But it is rather funny, isn’t it?” Leisurely Shockwave entered the room, but didn’t sit. “This problem between you and the law enforcers, it seems to keep coming up. Why so antagonistic to my police force, Director Soundwave? They are vital to the success of the new peacetime empire.”

“Then query: why pay them so little?”

Shockwave stiffened, and flashed him a glare. “Been prying, haven’t you? I would have thought you’d be more concerned with looking after your own duties, such as scanning the city for more Autobot graffiti.”

“Threats to empire, not always from outside. This practice -”

“Is not your concern, not even remotely,” Shockwave snapped. “I pay the lawkeepers well enough; they don’t complain. And why would they? Our law enforcement should be proud to serve their empire no matter what they’re paid. For you to suggest otherwise would not please Megatron.”

Soundwave held no illusions about Megatron’s reaction and therefore no intention of reporting this to him, and activated his vocalizer to say so. Before he could, Shockwave slapped his clawed hand down on the desk between them. “Make no mistake, Director Soundwave. Your little stunt in the command room made a few mecha giggle, and protected you for the time being. But I am still the Premier of Cybertron. It is my advice that Megatron seeks to govern his planet, my judgment that he trusts, my word that he takes. *You* sit in a closet and listen to conversations. You’re nothing but a glorified wiretap, whose usefulness has been dwindling every day since the end of the war. He even demoted you to prove it. You’re not so important to him as you were out in the field, Director, and you will *never* be more important than me. Remember that, and keep your head down.”

Silence, for a few nanokliks. Calmly Soundwave shut down the console, ejected the data chip, and set it on the desk by Shockwave’s hand.

“Shockwave, knows these contents?”

“What do I care?”

“Understanding: Shockwave, anxious to promote Decepticon history. This story, ideal lesson to audience. Power, never as permanent as previously assumed.”

He stood, drawing Shockwave’s complete attention to his massive build and the fact that he cleared the other by at least a head. Then he walked out without a glance back.



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The muffled quiet of the archives room stood in stark contrast to his own home, which was blasting music at a decibel level easily heard from outside by the time he returned. Soundwave touched down on the balcony, dialed down his audio receptors in preparation, and slid open the door. Inside, Jazz was lying flat on his back by the couch, legs propped up on the cushions, pede bouncing in time to the music as he played on his datapad.

“Welcome home, dear,” he chanted, arching his back just enough to grin at Soundwave upside down. “How was your day at the pit of poison?”

“Informative. Cease music.”

“Aw, but this is the best pa~art.” Jazz gifted him with an exaggerated pout, which was answered by Soundwave’s pointed stare. Jazz wilted, and sighed. “Never mind.” He wriggled away from the couch and crawled to the entertainment console, but just before his hand tapped the switch, something occurred to Soundwave.

“Jazz.”

“My love?”

“Request made: explain music.”

The switch flipped just before Soundwave spoke, leaving the room absolutely silent and no chance of his words going unheard. Jazz froze, one arm still partially outstretched, his mouth hanging open.

“What?”

“Explain music,” Soundwave repeated stiffly. “Your fascination, not understood. Jazz’s enjoyment so great, comprehension desired.”

Jazz fell over. From a partially kneeling position he simply tipped over and hit the floor with a thump, triggering mild amusement in Soundwave. His visor was almost white from the sheer surprise. “You want to... just because I like it so much? Really?”

“As stated.”

“Oh, Soundwave! I’m so happy!” Eagerly Jazz scrambled to standing, scurried to cross the distance between them, and cupped Soundwave’s face in his hands. “Are you feeling alright? Systems running hot? Never mind, I don’t care. Whatever this is, I’m going to take advantage – I might not ever get another chance. Quick, come sit down.”

He tugged Soundwave over to the couch, but when Soundwave tried to sit, Jazz pulled him forward and guided him into sitting on the floor in front of the couch instead. “A good stereo session is always conducted on the floor,” he lectured Soundwave. “Don’t worry about your precious dignity, it’s not as if anyone else can see. This way you can feel the reverberations underneath you, let the music *surround* you.”

His hands swept in a large circle, optical glow sparkling bright blue with his excitement. “I never thought this day would come, really. Oh, where to begin? You say you’ve never liked music, so I guess we’ll go back to the very beginning. Or what’s left of it, anyway. So much of our musical history got wiped out by the war, likewise for the musicians. Somebody salvaged this golden oldie, though.”

Fingertips tapped effortlessly across the console's buttons and a pulsing beat filled the room. Immediately Jazz's head started bobbing in time to its rhythm. "It's over a thousand vorns old, this one, so don't try and tell me you haven't heard it. I've been dancing to this beat for as long as I've been alive."

"Repetition, never tiring?"

"You wade through a hundred datastreams every day. That doesn't get tiring? Besides, artists sampled and recombined it with new beats all the time. Here, listen."

Again fingertips skittered across buttons, and he called up a new file with new music. Soundwave recognized the first beat, now intermingled with a second one, but the result was only another pulsing rhythm that sounded almost exactly like the first. So what was the point?

"Now, for hundreds of vorns, our musicians spun new beats, experimenting with tones and rhythms, but that's about as diverse as it got. No one realized there was even another way to create music, until we made contact with organic species. They don't have electronic synthesizers and built-in speakers, so they built instruments out of their environment. Clever, right? Can you believe that never occurred to anyone on this planet, to turn an empty fuel drum over and bang their hand on it? Aliens could make music out of inverted bowls, strings stretched tight, and metal funnels. Amazing stuff and *not* primitive, no matter what some purists say. Listen to this Monacus piece."

Distinctly unelectronic music filled the room, composed mostly of thumping and twanging. Jazz hummed along with visible delight, tapping his palms lightly against his leg armor. "It wasn't until we met aliens that we realized music could be composed without mathematical projection programming. Which isn't to say that organics aren't using some kind of math structure, because they do, but it's not their primary tool. They write the music relying on creativity and intuition, then use the math after the fact to segment it into portions. They sometimes use it to write in the harmony later. Oh! You probably don't even know what harmony is. Here's a good example – hear that tune? The whistling reed carries the principal beat of the music, and the drum in the background supplements it. Melody and harmony, perfectly combined. Harmony without melody has no direction, melody without harmony lacks richness. We'll work our way up to fugues and arpeggios."

Playfully he rapped Soundwave on the leg, oblivious to Soundwave's blank silence. "Now, we move on to the fun stuff. Human music is my latest fling, just like every new sentient species we stumble upon that's evolved enough to carry a tune. But Earth – wow. It was really something special, you know? I think we hit them at just the right time, when they'd advanced to the level of prosperity beyond basic tribal instruments, but before their separate cultures merged into a unified sound. Well, I say almost the right time; we missed Woodstock by just .13 of a vorn, did you know that? Tragic." Wistfully he sighed. "There was so much poetry in that music, so much feeling, so many stories desperately crammed into a few stanzas. They were so unhappy with their government."

He braced a hand against the floor, leaning close. "Humans discovered an amazing way to use music, Soundwave. For them, it wasn't just writing new combinations of beats. They applied language itself to the melody, using the meaning of the words to turn the music into a message. We organize and label our music by the math formula used, but they actually *named* the song, like a designation for a living thing. The name referred to the stories delivered through the song words, which they call 'lyrics'. You can't write a lyric in Cybertronian; we tried. Our language is too precise. Sure, it can name the exact hexadecimal code for my optical glow, but it can't compare my optics to the August summer sky." He was starting to dip into English, presumably because Cybertronian couldn't convey his intended meaning. "Human languages were meant to be song

lyrics, though. They didn't even know what a remarkable thing they'd done, since they'd been taking it for granted their whole history. I couldn't get enough of it. I just kept finding more and more of it to listen to, for joors at a time, drinking it in. There were so many stories."

"At this time, Jazz began using music to codify memories."

"That's right. I noticed how my memory banks accessed song lyrics in certain situations, and I realized that songs matched parts of my life. That's normal for humans; Carly told me that she and Spike shared a song that represented their relationship. After she told me that, I started the new filing method." He grinned impishly. "Michael Jackson was my first. Listen."

Again the music flipped, to a blaring human song about 'starting something'. Jazz snapped his fingers and undulated his head from side to side. Idly Soundwave noted that he'd never seen his slave sit still to music. Even if he wasn't on his pedes and dancing, he still tapped his fingers, or bobbed his head, or swayed in time to the beat. He was compelled to move by music.

"Michael Jackson is a genius," Jazz gushed, "but something tells me he's not really your type. That's cool; different beats for different bots. I've been thinking, and I suspect that classical music is more your style. So let's try Beethoven's Fifth. These are the eight most famous notes on the entire planet, so don't you dare tell me you never heard them while stationed there."

His console thundered with the sound of dozens of human instruments, all blended together into a forceful blast of noise. Jazz waved his arms enthusiastically, as if to emphasize each burst, and Soundwave concealed his wince. He did recognize the pattern, since there was very little in the auditory world that escaped his hearing, but he would have hardly bothered to pay any attention to such pointless music.

"Isn't it gorgeous?"

"Jazz's argument, negated. Statement: human music uses language to tell story. This music contains no words."

"Well no, not every human music has actual words. A lot of it doesn't. But the music still tells a story.... You can hear it if you listen. *Listen.*" There was something almost urgent about the way Jazz squeezed Soundwave's wrist. "Can't you hear the struggle, the triumph, the victory?"

Soundwave vented impatiently. "Jazz speaking nonsense."

Jazz looked crushed, for a moment, but then Soundwave could see him gathering his resolve. "Alright, fine. Let's try musicals. I love musicals; you can't say they don't tell a story, because that's all they do. This one here, this is one of the best. It's a tale of love and warfare in last-century New York. The boy and girl are running away together, their friends are running into battle, nobody knows exactly what's going to happen, but they know it will happen *tonight.*" Joyfully he launched into singing along with the recorded human voices.

"These words, understood," he admitted, when Jazz finally subsided. "However, repeated often."

"That's the chorus. Lyrics usually repeat to establish the structure of the song."

"Repeated phrases, inefficient and useless. Story can be told in less time without repetitions; music unnecessary."

Jazz shuddered, then squeezed his fists like he was trying to get control over himself. "But – Soundwave," he said, through somewhat gritted denta, "it's – pretty."

“Subjective.”

Jazz whimpered, then rocked back over to the console to tap at more buttons. “Maybe musicals wasn’t the right way to go after all. I’ll assume opera is out too, which is a shame, because I love the Italian. Country?” He laughed and shook his head. “Not likely. Rap? Too dangerous for the uninitiated. Hell, maybe we should just go for straight up rock n’roll...” He trailed off when another racket issued forth from the speakers, smile fading from his face.

“Jazz?”

“Van Halen,” he said, by way of explanation. “They were Blaster’s favorite.”

Soundwave stiffened and they both knew it. Jazz tried to pluck up his smile again. “Poor Jukebox – he always was a child of the eighties. He loved the music that was popular when we all woke up, and just wasn’t ready to move on with the rest of us at the end of the decade. I teased him about it a lot.”

Soundwave had nothing to say to that, so he didn’t. He didn’t want to hear about Blaster and his ridiculous hobbies, which he’d obviously shared with Jazz. Blaster never had to struggle to understand music for Jazz’s sake. He probably listened to it all the time. With his symbiotes.

“Hey.” Jazz was still kneeling by the console, but he nudged Soundwave’s pede to get his attention. “You’re not a Van Halen guy, that’s obvious, and no matter what Blaster might say, that’s not illegal. There is more to music than hairspray and electric guitars. Blaster might have been a hardcore metal devotee, but my tastes were more, ah, eclectic. I am a – how did Blaster put it? Musical whore.”

He grinned abashedly while still toying with Soundwave’s pede, gamely trying to cheer him up. “Let’s try something else, shall we? Forget rock. Everyone knows jazz is the most superior style of music on that planet, so let’s try this. A little Wynton Marsalis, for something mellow and mild.”

An altogether different blend of instruments poured forth. It was quieter than the last sample, which Soundwave appreciated, but this new music was perplexing. New formulas kept springing up and replacing the old ones, changing the tempo and structure of the music.

“Changes, frequent,” he pointed out. “Unexpected. Purpose?”

“That’s the nature of jazz, Soundwave. It improvises, adapts, keeps you guessing. Why do you think I took the name?”

“Suitable,” he agreed. “Unnecessarily complex and difficult to understand.”

Jazz winked at him. “It’s no good pretending you don’t like it, or you would have gotten rid of me months ago.”

Soundwave supposed there was no answer for that, either. Jazz tapped a button, and called up a new tune. “Here’s one that’s a little more contained, without all the exploration. It’s the signature song of one of the humans’ greatest cinematic achievements, *Casablanca*. Mild, but sultry, and goes down like a drink of mellow high grade.”

Visor powered down to a soft glow while Jazz rocked to the music, occasionally joining in with the human singer. “It’s not *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, but it’s still in my top ten. What do you think?”

“Words, meaningless. Story nonexistent.”

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong. This song is telling every story of love that ever was, the endless cycle of passion, jealousy, and heartbreak. It happens over and over again, as time goes by. Tragic, yet beautiful. Humans are always singing about love, it’s their favorite subject. Second favorite is freedom.” Lounging across one of Soundwave’s legs, Jazz gave him a small smile. “It’s good stuff. They’re very passionate about that, or they used to be anyway.”

“Message of song, more important than sound?”

“No,” he answered promptly, then hesitated. “Well- no. No, there’s no point to a good story if the song is no good at telling it. The melody has to have some kind of appeal: it has to be beautiful, or fun, or powerful.”

“Story, not important.”

“Oh no- no, it’s very important. It’s the reason for writing the music, what connects us to it. We can dance to Cybertronian beats, we can even like some of them more than others, but that’s nothing compared to the way humans *love* their music. The way *I* love their music. A song can be the story of your long-lost love, or an old friendship, or the rallying theme of a whole revolution. It’s everything you ever cared about, wrapped up in a tune you can dance to. How could anyone not be in love with that?”

Soundwave was getting frustrated. This enthusiasm for the music left him cold, with a prickling discomfort of jealousy in his spark. Music did not feed Jazz regularly, or take him on walks, or give him presents, but he loved it regardless and was only too happy to show it to the world. When would he ever look at Soundwave with such a glow in his visor? None of what he said made any kind of sense anyway. Jazz expected him to believe that random melodies could describe the specific details of a personal experience, yet also appeal to thousands of rebels? Absurd. He swore that music told the story of everything he’d ever cared about? By his own admission most of it was about love, yet Jazz had never even been in a relationship. Jazz danced to music under the Matrix, in his mind, but Jazz said he hated the Matrix. Or did he really? It was all so inconsistent. If he understood what that particular song had meant, would it make more understood?

“Soundwave.” Jazz shifted closer, interrupting his thoughts. “Not that I don’t appreciate you trying to learn, but I know what you’re trying to do. You think that if you figure out music, then you’ll be able to go into my mind again and read it. But that’s not how it works. The message in a song means something slightly different to everyone who hears it. It might bring up a personal memory, or invoke a specific ambition, but it won’t be the same for any two listeners, no matter how much they both love it. When it’s all said and done, music is a private affair. That’s why it’s the perfect code for my memories, even though that wasn’t why I started doing it. You won’t be able to translate my thoughts.”

“Noted,” Soundwave assured him, bracing a single fingertip under Jazz’s chin. But actually, that was not Soundwave’s intent. Another idea had occurred to Soundwave, as he listened to Jazz rave about the virtues of human music and its connection to his memories. Jazz’s method was to choose a relevant human song and substitute it for his recorded thoughts, based on criteria that Soundwave would probably never comprehend. Playback of the memory meant hearing the song, but now Soundwave wondered if the reverse might be true. If he played the right music, wouldn’t that automatically force Jazz’s mind to call up the corresponding memory? Knowledge of the appropriate music could result in wholesale manipulation of Jazz’s thoughts. Maybe Jazz didn’t know what kind of fire he was playing with when he started splicing foreign elements into his own mental files.

The theory was strictly academic for now. Soundwave was all too aware of the fact that he'd have no way of guessing the correct works of music. Earth alone had produced too many to count, and Jazz seemed to know them all. Still, it was a thought worth contemplating. Soundwave knew better than anyone that opportunities came for the patient.

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## on target

Soundwave had mixed feelings about Megatron's order to accompany him while out shooting. Soundwave had reported to Megatron during target practice before, and knew from experience that a day on the target range tended to put Megatron in a good mood. Also, if he heard anything unpleasant, he was more likely to inflict violence on the bullseye than the messenger. On the other hand, since the end of the war Megatron had taken to shooting outside Iacon's city limits, which made it a good opportunity to converse privately with one officer without the others having any way to eavesdrop or even know the meeting took place at all. Soundwave received his summons and joined Megatron later that cycle, fully expecting to discuss one of the other two ranking officers, and was not disappointed.

"Starscream's been getting more popular of late, hasn't he?"

Megatron punctuated the not-quite-question with firing his cannon at the distant target. Soundwave nodded.

"Affirmative, Lord Megatron."

"I thought so. Can't take a step in that infernal city without hearing the rabble chanting his name. Starscream the Air Commander. Starscream the explorer. Starscream the fragging pain in my aft. I'd like to grab each of those serfs by the neck and throw them into a room with him, for just half a joor, as punishment for their idiotically misplaced hero-worship. Do none of them actually know what he's *like*?" He strode across the scarred, littered ground as he spoke, barely pausing before he lifted his arm and fired at the next target, a half-crumbled building in the distance. Soundwave kept pace but stayed a safe three steps back, Bluestreak trotting along behind. When Megatron snapped his fingers, Bluestreak would scurry forward and hold out a fresh plasma pack.

"Starscream, talented aerial combatant," Soundwave answered diplomatically. "Known war hero. For these reasons, admired by many subjects."

"Oh and he knows it," Megatron growled. Five more steps, and a teetering signpost on the horizon was erased from existence. "It shows in every prancing step, every gleam in his optics, and every haughty toss of the head until I want to wrench it right off. That's not a Seeker; it's a smirk between wings! I feel the need to thrash him in the near future, just for getting too full of himself, but that won't change anything from the point of view of those wing-kissing slumdweller. They like him, and for whatever reason, they just keep on liking him more and more."

A reason that could accurately be described as Shockwave, not that Soundwave could say so. "Infatuation with Starscream, not exclusive to proper loyalty to Lord Megatron," he reassured his leader. "Recorded conversations indicate as much. Megatron, considered true emperor of Cybertron. Starscream, only a popular hero."

Megatron had raised his cannon, but now he lowered it without firing. "How popular? Popular enough to try anything stupid?"

They both knew what he meant. Starscream had always been a valuable and irreplaceable weapon, but a dangerous one too.

"Starscream's ambitions, fickle. No open demonstration of treason witnessed since establishment of your rule."

“You’ve been keeping a close optic on him? *Discreetly* close?” Megatron all but spat the word in distaste. The only thing he hated more than Starscream’s ego was having to admit that part of it was well-deserved. The Decepticons could have never won the war without the Seekers. And everyone knew it.

“Affirmative, Lord Megatron.”

“Well, I trust you’ll keep me aware of any suspicious activity on his part. I know I can count on you.” His mouth quirked up in a brief smile, then indicated a derelict transporter in the distance. “Go ahead, take a turn. I hope you haven’t been letting your skills get rusty.”

The target was barely visible without engaging macroscopic vision. Soundwave initiated weapons protocols, queued up his targeting subroutines, and began adjusting the linesight along his shoulder rifle. He had never specialized in marksmanship, but he was patient and focused, qualities that served him well in taking long shots across the battlefield.

“How’s your slave’s arm, by the way?” Megatron asked, just when Soundwave fired. Startled, he twitched and the shot went wide, veering left of the target. Discomfited, and hoping it didn’t show, Soundwave occupied himself with accepting a new plasma pack from Bluestreak.

“Repaired, Lord Megatron. Long-term damage, nonexistent.”

“Then why not bring him along to carry ammunition? That’s what he’s there for, among other things.” Megatron was looking at him very carefully. Not suspiciously, only carefully. What was he looking for?

“Jazz, usually confined at home for misbehavior,” he answered, honestly enough.

“I don’t doubt it, but you shouldn’t let something like that prevent you from using him properly. He should be at your side, attending to your needs. And Bluestreak here is lonely for him, I know.” A massive hand squeezed and pinched Bluestreak’s chin, idly turning it back and forth. The Autobot shuttered his optics and let his doorwings droop, looking more humiliated than in pain. “Jazz puts on a good show. Shouldn’t waste that.”

Soundwave bowed his head. “Understood, Lord Megatron.”

Megatron nodded, now looking satisfied. “Another time.” It was not rhetorical. They both knew that too. “Now, go on. Take another turn.”

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*... other than the small incidents listed above, slaves have been compliant. New defense systems ordered are still fully functional and operating as expected. No incidents of breach to report. As ordered by command, all my team have been confined to base or the immediate surrounding area in case of second attack. Respectfully request permission to drive further afield; team very restless. Your orders, as always, are my final word. All Hail Lord Megatron.*

- *Field Commander Motormaster, Earth Colony*

Soundwave set down the report and sat back in his chair, uneasy thoughts circling in his mind. Megatron had been pleased to hear that his fuel production fields on Earth were quiet, situation normal. To Soundwave, the peace seemed out of place. Motormaster had made no report of any



Sideswipe sighting, regardless of whether he was allowed to leave base and chase him down. There hadn't been so much as a glimpse of the wild Autobot since the day the Combaticons attacked and stole Hound. Almost as if, Soundwave considered unhappily, Sideswipe no longer had any reason to lure Motormaster away.

He looked at the monitor on his wall that showed Jazz back at home, innocently playing his datapad games, legs kicking back and forth as his head bobbed to some unheard music. Was it a coincidence noticed only in paranoia? Or was his slave just that good?

"What's up, boss?" Rumble had noticed the direction of Soundwave's gaze, and misinterpreted the cause. "Still obsessing over your secret research project? Isn't it time to let that go yet?"

"Negative," Soundwave said coolly. "Some theories formed. Difficulty in research compounded by large scale destruction of information resources during war. This task, potentially easier if Jazz's home state known."

"Polyhex," both twins said at once, matter-of-factly and without hesitation. They did something of a double-take at Soundwave's startled reaction. "What, he didn't tell you?"

"State how this information acquired," he ordered, busily trying to tamp down his surprise and excitement. His symbiotes shrugged.

"He just told us one day, like it was no big deal. Seemed like he meant it... seriously, he never told you?"

"Negative," Soundwave said again. He thought of Jazz's behavior on the eve of the mid-vorn, and how cagey and evasive he'd been about his background when Soundwave made his first casual inquiries. He was hiding something, oh yes, but he made a mistake when he let that detail slip to the cassettes. Jazz should have realized by now that anything his symbiotes know, Soundwave would know soon enough.

His fingers were already flying over the console keys. His earlier complaint that so many resources had been destroyed during the war held true, but some intranets had survived. Fragmented histories had all been uplinked to Aggrenet, too unwieldy and numerous to tackle with a broad search that lacked even a single keyword. Now, though, he could narrow his search to Polyhex, no keywords, and search for simply any newsworthy story that still existed. He would also have to narrow the timespan. To finish, he bounded the search up until the date Jazz was first reported in Iacon. As for when to start...

*I've been dancing to this music for as long as I've been alive.*

That would do. Soundwave performed a quick research on the composition date of that particular beat, and used that to bound the search's beginning date. Then he hit the button to initiate. Search results would be encrypted triple-deep and locked into a remote file accessible only to him. Again he glanced at the silent monitor; Jazz was still playing his games without a care in the world. Clever, clever little slave could not keep his secrets safe forever. Soundwave would see to it.

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Another cycle, another stroll through downtown Iacon. Soundwave watched Jazz place one pede neatly in front of the other in time to the music, occasionally breaking into a syncopated skip when the beat altered its pulse. He was chattering something about the composition of this music and its

significance, something about a fusion of human and Cybertronian styles, but Soundwave wasn't listening. Instead he was watching the lingering stares of mecha leaning against the nearest wall. Did they have nothing better to do than leer at his slave? Lately this district seemed to have more beggars than vendors or shoppers, and Soundwave wondered if a literal headcount was possible. He was tagging the query and preparing to send it to Ravage when an incoming comm took priority.

"*Soundwave!*" Megatron barked, and automatically he stood at attention.

"*Lord Megatron.*"

"*I need you to get to these coordinates in the factory district, now. Those two are at it again.*"

No need to ask which two. "*Nature of conflict, known?*"

"*No and I don't care,*" Megatron growled. Through the comlink Soundwave could hear his heavy ventilations, punctuated in the background by someone's howls of pain and rage. "*Some new project... Starscream's got his feathers in a twist over it, and they're both shrieking for my attention. But I am busy, so you deal with it. I do not expect to be interrupted again today.*"

The comm line switched off without farewell, bringing Soundwave's attention back to his surroundings and Jazz's hand waving in front of his face.

"Hellooo, Soundwave, still with me? I almost walked away without you. What an embarrassing way for a master to lose his slave. If I'd known it was that easy, I'd have just walked away years ago."

"Summons, received from Lord Megatron."

Jazz flinched and tried to cover it. "Oh. Found another red Autobot face splattered on his statue?"

"Unlikely. Come, prompt attendance necessary."

The war, Soundwave sometimes reflected, was not won the night that Optimus Prime died. There was still an enemy present – a shocked and demoralized enemy, yes, but also a dangerous one. Many battles still had to be fought. But privately, Soundwave dated the beginning of the Decepticon victory to the end of the Prime. It was not due to anything as straightforward as tactical advantage, or disruption of Autobot chain-of-command. Instead, Soundwave attributed the eventual victory to something else, something almost alien to the Decepticon forces. After the Prime had fallen, for the first time, Decepticons experienced harmony. Soldiers who'd always been insubordinate were suddenly taking orders, and executing them without fuss. Subfactional teams who despised one another managed to carry out whole missions together. Megatron and Starscream... well, they didn't exactly stop arguing, but they did stop trying to kill one another, and that was an improvement. It was as though Prime's death had suddenly reminded the entire treacherous, squabbling army of the purpose they'd been fighting for, and simultaneously fired them with new hope that they could succeed. Soundwave labeled it a phenomena of serendipitous unity. Laserbeak, with her newfound predilection for animated movies, preferred the human word *magic*.

Whatever it was, they couldn't have won the war without it. But now Soundwave could see that unity, that harmony, slipping farther away with each passing cycle. The loss of their common enemy didn't help, though Soundwave suspected it was the spoils of power that were the real cause. The Decepticons were no longer just soldiers, but rulers, ready to tear each other apart for the status and privileges spilling from Megatron's hands. That brief spirit of camaraderie was long gone now.

There was nothing left between the top officers but suspicion, envy, and hatred.

Soundwave could hear them before he saw them, as he turned the final corner. Starscream was riding a high-pitched harangue to its zenith, not bothering to pause for either his own rest or to acknowledge Shockwave's angry, clipped responses. Going by Starscream's gesticulations, they were fighting about a cluster of modest buildings behind Starscream, though he still couldn't distinguish the exact cause of the argument. Looking a cross between bored and annoyed, Thundercracker and Skywarp drifted off to the side, just close enough to be intimidating but far enough to spare their own audios.

Soundwave could swear Jazz actually licked his lips. "Have fun in the playground, babe," he murmured. "Remember to not play nice with the other Cons."

Soundwave didn't bother to respond to that, but he pressed one hand on Jazz's shoulder in silent direction to be quiet, then moved closer. The others still hadn't even noticed his arrival. "Commander Starscream, Premier Shockwave," he finally said, just to get their attention. "Nature of dispute, unknown. Clarification needed."

"Soundwave? What are you doing here?" Shockwave sneered, at the same time Starscream was snapping "None of your business!"

"Presence here, directed by Lord Megatron," Soundwave answered calmly. "His instructions, uncover cause of dispute and seek resolution."

"Megatron sent *you*?" Jealousy curdled all too clearly in Shockwave's voice. "I didn't ask for you, I asked Lord Megatron to come! He must attend to this personally."

"However, Megatron now occupied. His preference to remain uninvolved, very clear; recommend against contacting him. Cause of dispute?"

"This fool thinks he's going to tear down these laboratories," Starscream spat, "and rebuild another of his sweatshop factories in their place!"

"I do not think, I know, and I *know* because I am the Premier of Cybertron and it is my jurisdiction to direct economic development in this city. How I seek to go about it is none of the Air Commander's concern."

"It is my concern when a plebian number cruncher like yourself doesn't have the sense to recognize one of former Iacon's finest laboratories. You would knock over a functioning radon articulator if you thought you could squeeze one more assembly line into its place! Well you're not going to bulldoze this, I won't let you. Go find another target for your relentless industrialization of old Iacon. This one is off limits."

"You are in no position to tell me what's off limits," Shockwave snarled, "Seeker. I marked this entire street for reconstruction a long time ago, and I will have it. The Constructicons have confirmed that the uplinks for a power grid are still in good condition, and the foundations are stable. It is a waste to leave these buildings lying empty when they could host thriving factories, manufacturing goods and creating jobs!"

"You can build your tedious drone mills anywhere – and *have*. These labs are not easily replaced! All the necessary equipment and infrastructure is present and easily repaired, if given the chance. A flick of the switch would link them into the grid. They're perfect, and I will not let you waste them for the sake of another ugly shrine to your obsessive manufacturing."

“Starscream,” Soundwave interposed, before Shockwave could retaliate. “Your concern for these buildings, very great. Personal benefit, not understood. Reason for concern?”

Starscream hesitated, and Jazz spoke up instead. “It’s his future academy, Soundwave. Labs, lecture halls, the works. He’s had his optic on this compound for a long time.”

Starscream shot a dark look at Jazz, who grinned and shrugged innocently. Shockwave’s vents opened with a faint hissing *aah* of understanding. “I see, this is about that much ballyhooed academy of yours. Well, you’ve been making your plans long enough. If you wanted these buildings for your own use, you should have said so earlier.”

“If I’d said anything at all about these labs, you would have been sure to destroy them all that very night!”

“Really, Commander Starscream,” Shockwave responded, poisonously sweet, “you shouldn’t be so paranoid. But what’s done is done, and my redevelopment plans were finalized a long time ago. I do require this block for expansion.”

“Oh no, you don’t!” Starscream’s optics flared brilliant red and he backed two steps closer to the compound’s gate, arms outspread as if to block an assault from Shockwave. “No, no, no I won’t let you! Soundwave, your pests have been crawling all over this city since the end of the war. Tell me there’s not plenty of room elsewhere for his Primus-forsaken drudgery mills.”

Soundwave didn’t even have the chance to activate his vocalizer before Shockwave jumped to respond. “That is not the purpose of Director Soundwave’s surveillance. *And* he is in no place to judge what space is available and what is not. That is my jurisdiction as premier, and not his task to usurp.” He shot a nasty look at Soundwave, as if daring him to argue otherwise. “This block is next in line for development. I will not have the Constructicons repair the roads and the power grid throughout and past this subsection, just to get to the buildings in the next one. It’s a waste of resources, and leaves perfectly good factory space lying empty.”

“Your policies would have all the planet slaving away over your assembly lines,” Starscream spat contemptuously. “I aspire to something greater for Cybertron – a future of scientific discovery and creativity! That’s worth far more than a little extra effort from the Constructicons.”

“Typical flier, always with his head in the stratosphere. Haven’t you noticed that the planet is scarred from war, with a population barely able to feed itself?”

“If that’s true, then it is the fault of no one but the current governor.” Starscream’s optics took on a snide gleam. “Surely Soundwave agrees that your heavy-handed policies have made life miserable for the empire’s subjects. Don’t you, Soundwave?”

Alarms clamored in Soundwave’s mind at the thought of getting entangled in Starscream’s agenda, particularly given the wary optic Megatron was keeping on his second’s rise in popularity. This was no time to fuel Starscream’s drive for more power.

“Disagreement on some policies,” he answered cautiously, “does not lessen premier’s jurisdiction in this case.”

Starscream threw up his hands and screeched in disgust. “I suppose I should have expected that from Megatron’s faithful lackey!”

“I’m pleased, Director Soundwave,” Shockwave said prissily, “that you’ve elected not to trespass on my authority. For once.”

*“Mai sanuk nii?” Jazz piped up. “Isn’t this fun? It’s like a threesome of hate! Incidentally, why does Thundercracker keep giving you dirty looks?”*

The blue Seeker, evidently still bearing a grudge about that slave of his, was indeed scowling at him. Inwardly, Soundwave sighed. Shockwave had drawn himself back up into his haughtiest posture. “I think my prerogative to reconstruct this street has been well established. The Constructicons begin tomorrow.”

“They can try,” Starscream retorted, overtly brandishing his null rays. Shockwave hissed again, this time in displeased surprise.

“You would dare threaten violence against the empire?”

“I am the empire too, don’t forget. And I did so much more to make it one than you ever did.”

Now Starscream was closing in on Shockwave, not in attack, not quite, but his armor bristled with aggression and so did his ever-loyal wingmates’. Soundwave sensed Jazz edging a little further back behind his own arm, which prompted self-defense protocols to initiate. Those alarms were going off again; threats might be a normal function of daily Decepticon politics, but violence was a dangerous step just now. Shockwave didn’t have a chance against the lead trine if they decided to attack.

“Shockwave.” Soundwave took a step forward, drawing both furious gazes back towards him. “Other locations not possible?”

“Oh, now you’re taking the traitor’s side?”

“Seeking resolution,” Soundwave corrected tersely, one optic still on Starscream’s null rays. “Your redevelopment progress, converted many buildings to factories. Buildings, plentiful. This location, crucial to Starscream’s plans.”

“Yes, and the very phrase *Starscream’s plans* should send a chill up the spinal strut of every loyal Decepticon,” Shockwave snarled. “I’m quite through wasting my time on this affair. Demolition proceeds as scheduled.”

Jet engines revved threateningly, and Soundwave’s urge to trigger his own weapons became more insistent. “Shockwave, reminder: not available to conduct surveillance of site.”

Now Shockwave hesitated, glancing back from Soundwave to the dangerously angry Starscream. Everyone there knew he was capable of inflicting vicious sabotage on the site, and Shockwave had used up all his favors from Soundwave on that count a long time ago.

“Then I will go to Lord Megatron and have him command you to do it.”

“Megatron, displeased by internal strife,” Soundwave pointed out all too truthfully. “Unlikely to react favorably to first officer that issues complaint. Suggestion, Shockwave delay demolition until alternate site for academy confirmed.”

“Why should I-“ Starscream started indignantly, and Soundwave held up a hand.

“Perhaps, when confirmed by third party that no alternate sites available, stronger case can be made for compound’s preservation.”

“Oh? And what third party would that be?”

Again Soundwave suppressed a sigh. “Soundwave, best option.”

“What?” everyone said, Starscream and Shockwave surprised, Jazz dismayed. Urgently he tugged at Soundwave’s arm. “Soundwave, no! This isn’t your stupid problem or your stupid fight!”

“Such a lot of noise it makes,” Shockwave commented, disapprovingly. “Slaves should learn how to keep silent in the company of their betters.”

“Drop dead, Shockwave,” Jazz promptly suggested, in crystal-clear and unmistakeable English. Fortunately, Shockwave was the only one there that didn’t understand it. Soundwave saw Skywarp smother a snort into his hand. “Soundwave, don’t do this. They’ll just drag you down into their catfight and you’ll be the one that gets scratched. You don’t have to. Nobody’s ordering you.”

“Jazz, hush.” Soundwave laid a single warning fingertip over Jazz’s mouth, but kept his gaze on the other Decepticons. “Allow time for proper exploration of unfinished zones. Will present unbiased findings shortly. If suitable alternate site found, conflict is unnecessary. If total absence of alternatives confirmed, Starscream’s case made stronger. Ideal option now for both Starscream and Shockwave, agreed?”

Starscream crossed his arms with a huff. “I guess it’s better than nothing.”

“It is an inconvenient delay,” Shockwave sniffed, “but I am generous enough to grant it.”

Defense protocols eased off, and Soundwave allowed his vents to exhale. “Your agreements, acknowledged. Cooperation, appreciated.”

“I’ve wasted enough time on this nonsense for now,” Shockwave declared. “I have many factory inspections to complete while in this district. Happy searching, Director.”

He turned on his heels and began a haughty march away. “Quite the convoy, for a simple walk along the assembly lines,” Jazz drawled, still in English. “Isn’t it two more than usual today, Premier? I wonder what it is you’re scared of.”

Jazz was right; Shockwave had eight of his drone guards present instead of only six. Soundwave tensed again when Shockwave looked back at Jazz, but he didn’t understand and wasn’t going to lower himself to ask. He only cast a blank, uncertain glance in Jazz’s direction, then stalked around the corner and out of sight. But Soundwave had a feeling that Jazz didn’t say it for Shockwave, he’d said it for Starscream, whose wingtips had just stiffened with keen interest.

“Come,” he told Jazz. “Damage, enough for one day.”

“Yes, master. I agree completely.”

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## on laughter

“... I am the empire too, he said, and I did more to make it one than *you* ever did. You should have seen Shockwave’s- well, I guess there’s not much to see on that face, but I’d imagine he was pretty pissed. That’s when Starscream started getting a little too close for comfort. I swear on Elvis’ grave, I thought he was going to shoot Shockwave right in front of all of us. Had I known, I’d have brought snacks.”

Jazz pouted in concentration as he leaned over his project, carefully creasing the fold in his red sheet of foil. He wasn’t going very fast, due to more talking than folding, but he’d still made more progress than the twins. Concentration and patience were never their strong suits, and now the floor was half covered with a rainbow of crumpled foils. After half a joor of impatiently tossing aside their half-done work, the stack Soundwave had purchased was almost gone. That was more than could be said for the gelled treats, which hadn’t lasted more than two breems.

“So then what happened?”

“Soundwave stepped in and kept the peace, that killjoy.” Jazz glanced up at Soundwave just briefly enough to wink. “So much for the showdown at the OK Iacon Corral. Shouldn’t have come between them, love. You know you can’t win now. No matter what you find, one of them’s going to be furious at you.”

Frenzy shrugged. “He’s always doing slag like that.”

“Throwing himself on landmines?”

“No, solving problems for Megatron. He keeps the peace.”

“A thankless task amongst war models, I should think.”

Soundwave was brushing the wings of both Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, each perched on a knee joint, and did not pause in his task. “Violence between Shockwave and Starscream, not unprecedented. However, at this stage of empire’s development, dangerous. Could now provoke dangerous backlash.”

“Exactly!”

“That outcome, not desirable.”

“To you,” Jazz said pertly. He leaned closer to the couch and held up his mostly-finished project. “Here, how’s this?”

The brush stilled as Soundwave examined Jazz’s work, cupping Jazz’s hand from underneath to pull it a little closer. “Jazz must fold here now, and here. Lines, run this way. Understood?”

“You’re better than them, you know.”

The words came without warning, quiet but straightforward, and heard by everyone. The twins even looked up from throwing foil wads at one another, and Buzzsaw unshuttered one drowsy optic. Taken aback, Soundwave met Jazz’s steady gaze. “You do more work than any of them but talk about it less than half as much. They scream and holler when they don’t get what they want, but all you care about is what’s best for the Cons, and then you do it, even if it gets you nothing. I don’t get that at all, but you still do it, and they don’t even bother to notice. They don’t deserve you.”

An uncertain smile touched at Jazz's lips, like he wasn't sure he should have said so much. Then he shrugged and settled himself back on the floor, folding a new crease. Now the twins' stares flipped back to Soundwave, who took a moment to consider his response.

"If this conduct a fault, then Jazz also guilty."

"Beg pardon?"

"Jazz, exhibits same behavior. Consistently works to sway attention and abuse from fellow Autobots, attracting Decepticon notice for sake of their protection. Result, often high personal cost. Damages, extensive."

Jazz stared, astonished, and seemed not to notice that all the symbiotes had now switched their gaze back to him. "Well, I... that's different."

"Explain how."

"It just is! For starters, I *want* to help them."

"Soundwave, wants to preserve peace."

"I don't hate my friends the way you hate those two."

"Personal feelings irrelevant, duty more important. Underlying motive the same. Soundwave, only doing for cause as Jazz does for his. Inconvenience to Soundwave, far less painful than usual results for Jazz."

Jazz looked flustered, and a little annoyed, the way he usually did when he knew Soundwave had outwitted him. He resolved the problem by returning his attention to the foil sheet in his hands, and pretending the conversation had never happened.

"There," he announced proudly, "done! What do you think? Pretty good Laserbeak, huh?"

Laserbeak trilled appreciatively, but the twins looked more critical. "I dunno. Looks more like a jet than a cassette to me."

"What? No it doesn't!"

"The angles are all wrong for Beak's wings," Rumble pointed out. "They're too flat. What you've got there is a Seeker."

Jazz looked dismayed, but upon closer reflection he had to recognize it too. "Ah well, lucky me. Because I haven't had enough of Seekers in my life." Thoughtfully he wiggled the little red jet, watching the light flash and sparkle across the wings, then grinned.

"It is I, Starscream! No, wait- Aerial Commander Starscream! I mean, LORD Starscream! Look upon me, the most beautiful genius on Cybertron! Worship me!"

Every one of his symbiotes snorted with laughter at the same time, taken aback by the distressingly accurate impersonation. Nobody could imitate Starscream's voice exactly, which was a mercy, but Jazz's intonation and cadence was so reminiscent of Starscream's usual speech that Soundwave could almost hear the real thing.

"I want my academy!" Jazz chanted gleefully. "Mine, mine, mine! MegaTRONNNNN!"

Hastily he snatched a wad of silver foil that Rumble had given up on before the intended shape could



become clear. “You screeched, Starscream? Primus, your voice is annoying. Why haven’t I ripped out your vocalizer yet?”

“I don’t know! Why haven’t I made good on my thousand and one threats to overthrow and destroy you?”

“Probably because your mouth is the only part of you that actually works!”

Jazz gasped theatrically, bouncing his puppet Starscream up and down in agitation. “How dare you treat me this way! I am the genius of Vos and I want my academy! And I want Skyfire! Even though I betrayed him and he left me and our history is more twisted than even my kinky berth habits!”

“Hah! I will never allow you to have him. I’m far too obsessed with our own fucked-up joke of a relationship to even think of sharing you with someone else. It goes without saying that I have possessive issues.”

“You just don’t want me to be happy!”

“Exactly! Now get on my berth and I’ll prove it to you.”

“Frag you!”

“Not if I frag you first!”

Both foil puppets pounced on each other, hissing and growling. Rumble and Frenzy had already collapsed with laughter and were rolling back and forth, while Laserbeak flapped her wings in effort to not topple off Soundwave’s leg. Buzzsaw, remarkably, actually cackled out loud. Looking terribly pleased with himself, Jazz allowed his battered puppets to drop to the floor, and bowed.

“Then they killed each other. And the rest of Cybertron lived happily ever after.”

Vaguely Soundwave supposed he should suppress such flagrant disrespect, that being the thing his cassettes were constantly searching for when they scoured the city for dissidents. But then, as an Autobot, Jazz had already labeled himself a dissident a long time ago, and anyway the giddy laughter flowing through their symbiotic link was too precious to cut short.

“Hey.” Jazz was poking at one of his pedes. “You’re insulting my act. Wasn’t it funny? Don’t you want to laugh, just a little?”

“He’s laughin’” Frenzy wheezed, still trying to get his ventilations under control. “You just can’t hear it.”

“Aw, now that’s just not fair. What is this, a members-only club?” Jazz gifted him with a mock pout, at which Soundwave was nearly tempted to roll his optics. Trust Jazz to care about such an inconsequential thing.

“Expression of humor, readily felt through symbiotic link,” he explained. “Physical expression of ‘laughter’ manifested solely in frame vibrations.”

He thought that would be the end of it, but now a gleam of interest was showing in that visor. “So you *do* laugh. Just very, very quietly. The court jester is intrigued.” Soundwave experienced a mild flash of apprehension when Jazz moved, but all he did was ease forward into a kneeling position by Soundwave’s pedes. Blue optical light sparkled with anticipation and then, without warning, Jazz

burst into song.

“I started on a journey about a year ago, to a little town called Morrow in the state of Ohio. I’ve never been much of a traveler and I really didn’t know, that Morrow was the hardest place I’d ever try to go!”

*What?* Bewildered, Soundwave stared down at his gleefully singing slave in astonishment, and so did everyone else. Rumble and Frenzy’s jaws were steadily falling open, which seemed to bother Jazz not at all, or if anything, encouraged him.

“So I went down to the station for my ticket and applied for tips regarding Morrow, not expecting to be gayed. Said I, ‘My friend, I’d like to go to Morrow and return no later than tomorrow for I haven’t time to burn!’ Said he to me, ‘Now let me see if I have heard you right. You’d like to go to Morrow and return tomorrow night. You should have gone to Morrow yesterday and back today, for the train that goes to Morrow is a mile upon its way. If you had gone to Morrow yesterday now don’t you see, you could have gone to Morrow and returned today at three. For the train today to Morrow, if the schedule is just right, today it goes to Morrow and returns tomorrow night!’”

Briefly Soundwave wondered if he should check his slave for viruses. Every word that left Jazz’s mouth made less sense than the last, and through all of it he kept on beaming with delight, grinning at Soundwave like he expected him to join in on the nonsense any moment.

“Said I, ‘My friend it seems to me you’re talking through your hat. There is a town named Morrow on the line now tell me that!’ ‘There is,’ said he, ‘but take from me a quiet little tip. To go from here to Morrow is a fourteen hour trip! The train today to Morrow leaves today at eight oh-five. At half-past ten tomorrow is the time it should arrive. So if from here to Morrow is a fourteen hour jump, can you go today to Morrow and get back today, you chump?’ Said I, ‘I’d like to go to Morrow so can I go today, and get to Morrow by tonight if there is no delay?’ ‘Well well,’ said he to me, ‘and I’ve got no more to say. CAN you get anywhere tomorrow and get back again today?’ Said I, ‘I guess you know it all but kindly let me say, how can I get to Morrow if I leave this town today?’ Said he, ‘You cannot go to Morrow any more today, ‘cause the train that goes to Morrow is a mile upon its way!’”

Somewhere on Laserbeak’s end of the link, a revelation had clicked into place and he could feel her amusement accelerating past her confusion. That triggered understanding in Buzzsaw, much as he tried to hide his head under a wing and ignore it, and the twins would not be far behind. Somehow, link or no link, Jazz seemed to know it too, and his grin got even wider.

“I was so disappointed! I was mad enough to swear. The train had gone to Morrow and had left me standing there. He had no right in telling me that I was a-howling jay; I could not go to Morrow so I guess in town I’ll stay!”

At last, the absurdity was over. Laserbeak’s wings were shaking with her repressed giggles, which Buzzsaw was desperately struggling to ignore. Jazz bowed his head with a flourish, and that’s when the lights switched on for Rumble.

“Ohh... *tomorrow*. I get it!” He dissolved into hysterical laughter, followed a second later by Frenzy when he got it too. Three siblings’ gasping laughter was too much for Buzzsaw to resist, and he was unwillingly pulled into the mirth. Soon Soundwave was surrounded, both physically and telepathically, by his symbiotes’ delighted reaction to the most ridiculous bunch of nonsense he’d ever heard, and this when he’d thought all human songs were ridiculous to begin with. He understood the play on words well enough, but if Jazz thought Soundwave would insult his own dignity by finding humor in such silliness, then Jazz must be as insensible as the author of the song.

Jazz just kept on grinning at him though, visor glow narrowed in scrutiny, and Soundwave realized that Jazz was actually looking for the signs of laughter. He was honestly convinced that this song would accomplish the deed. Why did it even matter? Why did Jazz bother to care, when no one on this planet had ever before worried about Soundwave's sense of humor? Thousands of vorns had passed in his lifetime, and mecha had trembled before him, feared him, respected him, tried to kill him. No one had ever tried to make him laugh.

That, rather than the song itself, was eventually what got Soundwave to laugh. He couldn't help it. Jazz was forever demonstrating new levels of absurdity, but this one was like nothing Soundwave had dealt with before. Maybe if he hadn't been staring so intently, eagerly watching for it, but he was, and Soundwave couldn't resist any longer. He laughed, the feel of it rolling along their link and mingling easily with the symbionts' hilarity. No outsider in the room would have heard a thing.

Jazz, though, had his own ways. Before Soundwave knew what was happening, he'd slithered up between Soundwave's knees and pressed one of his audial sensors up against Soundwave's frame, just underneath his chest compartment. Frenzy hiccupped mid-laugh and shoved Rumble hard on the shoulder, optics paling with surprise. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw gaped. And Soundwave, who'd just been thinking that Jazz could never surprise him again, froze. True that Jazz only wanted to feel the subtle vibrations of his laughter, but the posture was so close, so *intimate*. Trusting. Instinctively, Soundwave lifted his hand and glided it softly over Jazz's helm.

"Well, that didn't last long," Jazz remarked, dropping back to a sitting position on the floor, grinning innocently like nothing had just happened. "But it was long enough. No matter what else happens in my life, I can now say that I got to hear Soundwave laugh."

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*Director Soundwave: I wish to extend my gratitude for your intercession in that small dispute yesterday between myself and Commander Starscream. The displays of hostility were unfortunate, and terribly unbecoming of Cybertron's leadership, but such disagreements are commonplace, and only to be expected in the course of the empire's growth. The inhabitable portions of the city are still far too crowded, and resources must be applied wisely. After your intervention, a fresh review of my plans became necessary. Should Commander Starscream take custody of that particular subsection, contingency plans had to be arranged. I noted then that subsection A217, which happens to include your home, is also a suitable candidate for demolition and renovation. As I'm sure you know, your building and those surrounding it are in appalling condition, and will need upgrading before they can host widescale habitation.*

*I have prepared this new plan in a report submitted to Lord Megatron, for his approval. Should these plans take effect, you will be required to vacate your current home. As always, the third level of Decepticon Headquarters is open to you and your subordinates for housing needs, as long as is necessary. Again, thanks are due for your timely mediation.*

- Premier Shockwave

The night cycle was quiet. Soundwave lay still on his berth, gaze on the ceiling as he listened to Jazz's steady ventilations, replaying Shockwave's message in his mind. His reaction was, naturally, anything but surprise. Shockwave was a powerful enemy and their relationship, never particularly warm, had been growing steadily more poisonous of late. Since that day that Soundwave had publicly humiliated him before Megatron, he'd always known Shockwave would find some way to retaliate. Intervening in the matter of that academy had provided the final snapping point, and given

Shockwave the perfect ammunition all at once. The environment of the Decepticon Empire was getting more complicated with every passing cycle.

Marginally he adjusted his position, to better see Jazz. His slave was still fast asleep, which was no surprise given that the active cycle did not begin for another quarter-joor. Soundwave had been awake for most of the night, since Shockwave's message dropped into his frequency. Deciding that he couldn't wait any longer, Soundwave reached forward and gently shook Jazz's shoulder.

"Mmph," came the mumbled response, and Soundwave squeezed his arm.

"Jazz, wake now."

"No ts'not."

"Jazz, now."

"Too'rly."

Patiently Soundwave cupped Jazz's chin and turned his head from side to side, until a blue glow flickered wanly into existence. Unhappily Jazz growled and pushed away his hand, curling up into a ball with his head tucked under his arm. "Goway, you're lying. S'not time to get up yet."

"Today, you wake early." Soundwave scooped Jazz into his arms and left the berth chamber, treading quietly past the twins asleep on the couch. Ravage was not so easily eluded and promptly woke, one audial sensor twitching curiously at his master, but at an unspoken command from Soundwave he lay his head back down between his paws and returned to recharge. Once out on the balcony, Soundwave fired up his thrusters and launched. The shock of acceleration woke up Jazz better than he could, and he sensed his slave's systems finally starting their boot-up.

"What's going on? Where are we going?"

"Intended destination, unrepaired sector in outer Iacon. Search for suitable academy location planned."

"And you want my help?" Jazz perked up a little, before a shadow of confusion crossed his face. "But isn't this the kind of thing you'd task Ravage with? Or the aerials?"

"Today, search to be conducted personally. Your presence desired; Jazz, keenly observant."

"Nice to be appreciated." Jazz preened a little, then rested his head against Soundwave's shoulder and fell into a light doze for the rest of the journey. He didn't move again until Soundwave touched down on the warped, cracked surface of a vacant street. Jazz yawned and stretched when Soundwave tipped him onto his feet. If he noticed Soundwave had not put him in chains before departing, he didn't comment.

"Why did it have to be so early?"

"Earlier start strengthens chances of success." It was truth, though not all of it. Soundwave did not want this little trip to go noticed by anyone. "Go. Explore. Notify me of possible candidates."

Jazz still looked uncertain, so Soundwave simply started walking. At first Jazz kept to his side, but that quickly bored him, and he started making tentative forays into the buildings alongside the street. When he understood that he really was allowed to venture freely in and out of sight, Jazz livened up considerably and tackled the task with enthusiasm. Soundwave watched him scramble up the sides of buildings, leaping over gaps and swinging under beams. There was no real danger of Jazz ever

getting lost, with his slave collar, so if he vanished from sight then Soundwave simply waited patiently for him to reappear. The solitude and peace of the empty sector was soothing, and Soundwave relished the quiet.

“Hey.” Jazz materialized out of the shadows above him, balancing easily on a thin rail. “I’ve spotted a few good structures, but I don’t know much about laboratory infrastructure. What I do know is that I lived with Starscream for a long time, and I know how hard he looked for a good academy site. I think he put more work into that search than anything else he’s done since the end of the war. It matters a lot to him, Soundwave. And I think that if there were more potential sites out in this city, he’d probably already know about them.”

“This much, understood.”

Jazz vented a small sigh. “I know your reasons for getting in the middle of all this, and I even understand them. I do. But I still wish you hadn’t done it. I have this feeling in my spark that this is not going to lead anywhere good.”

“My decisions, final. Jazz’s only concern, following them.”

He spoke more sharply than he’d intended, and regretted it when he saw the surprise and hurt flash across Jazz’s visor. “Are you... mad at me? I haven’t even done anything that bad.” He considered that and added, “lately.”

“Negative,” Soundwave answered, and started walking again. “Only concerned.”

“Concerned about what?”

He chose not to answer that at all.

Without checking his chronometer, Soundwave knew the active cycle had begun by the pale glow on the horizon. Curfew was over and the power grid was lighting up the city again, at least as far as its reach would allow. Out here, the gloom was lit only by the stars above. Soundwave followed Jazz from below as he bounded from one rooftop to another, then swung over the edge and through the gap of a shattered window. Soundwave had to navigate a small pile of wreckage and a half-collapsed door before he could enter the building too, a large warehouse-type structure that played back quiet echoes of his footsteps. Jazz was still overhead, making use of the complicated catwalks and support pillars to indulge in a few acrobatics.

“What do you think?” he asked, when he’d wended his way closer to the ground. “Building’s sound, and it’s got great echoes. Starscream would be surrounded by the sound of his own voice. But I don’t think it has anything suitable for laboratories. We’re just a couple of fools on an errand, you and me, but at least it’s a pretty starlit errand.”

Soundwave watched him spiral down the length of a pole and drop neatly onto a cross rail, moving easily into a fluid walkover. As always, Jazz was the picture of grace.

"Jazz."

"My love?"

"Dance for me."

Well, perhaps not always the picture of grace. Jazz stumbled and nearly fell off the rail, visor almost

pure white with shock. "Wh-what did you say?"

"Dance," Soundwave repeated, "for me."

"Right now? Here?"

"Venue, not large enough?"

"No," Jazz said quickly, regaining his balance. "No, it's enough space. Just... not what I was expecting. But I'll make it work if that's what you want." He finished spiraling down that pole to the ground floor, looking plenty confused but excited as well. "What music shall it be? I need something to suit the mood, something mellow and seductive. Ooh! I got it - Great White's *House of Broken Love*. This is gonna be so good." He skipped with excitement on his way to Soundwave, pressing his hands up against Soundwave's chest to guide him backwards. "You just stand right there, lover, and get ready for your mind to be blown. Nobody's seen this show in a very long time."

He blew Soundwave a kiss as he retreated, and then soft human music began to spill from his speakers. Jazz exhibited no diffidence or self-consciousness about this very personal performance. Without hesitation he began moving to the music, obviously at ease. At first Soundwave saw no difference between this and the little steps Jazz often displayed, but for Jazz they were just the beginning. The music swelled in volume and Jazz's moves became more complicated, working in jumps and flips, even spinning around on his knee joints on the floor. Every move was sinuous, graceful, and erotic.

"Jazz, well versed in this talent."

A smug grin was his response, before Jazz decided to incorporate the pole into some of his dance. That was indeed a fairly astonishing posture he could accomplish while hanging from it. Soundwave waited until he'd returned to dancing on the floor before he spoke again.

"Jazz, presumably danced often in former establishment. Iacon nightspot, named Sparkbeat." He watched Jazz perform an improbable combination of maneuvers. "But Jazz, not native to Iacon. Traveled here sometime before vorn 274, from original city-state Polyhex."

Jazz's pedes didn't miss a beat, but he did flash a surprised look at Soundwave. "That's right."

"Jazz, learned to dance in Polyhex. Jazz, danced in Polyhexian nightspot Flashpoint."

This time Jazz almost tripped over his own pedes, horror flashing across his face before he could hide it. He stopped and looked straight at Soundwave, mouth open. "How did you -"

"Command to stop, not given," Soundwave reminded his slave. "Performance, not finished."

Jazz stared, incredulous, but the music still played and Soundwave was waiting expectantly. Pride, or obedience, or perhaps some curious mixture of both compelled his pedes to start moving again. He still watched Soundwave warily, but continued to dance as gracefully as before.

"Flashpoint, popular nightspot in Polyhex," Soundwave carried on, in calm contrast to the look on Jazz's face. "Archives, cite multiple praises of lead dancer. Also multiple investigations, unsuccessful, of owners' criminal activities. Flashpoint eventually closed due to mutual homicide between three owners, vorn 197. Massive investigation left several news stories, still chronicled in Aggrenet archives."

Was Jazz dancing faster now? He still moved in perfect time to the music, but there was an aggression in the way his body whipped about, his moves sharp and clean.

"Designation of dancer, not reported in archived stories. Only quoted description of one customer, mentioning exceptional dancing talent. Identity of dancer, very unclear to all news sources. No formal designation known to public. Perhaps, only nightspot owners knew true identity."

No response. Jazz was pouring fierce concentration into his dance now, as the music swelled to its fevered climax, echoes filling the darkness around them.

"Jazz's profile in Aggrenet, lacking a sparking date. No records in any Vector Sigma temple found. This lack of record, very unusual. Reasons for missing Sigma record, not many. Usual cause: protoform sparked in secret. Priests conducted spark transfer without making official record, probably for considerable reward. Early in Decepticon revolution, temple discovered with large horde of treasure, payment for secret sparking ceremonies. Newly-sparked mecha, not counted as official citizens of Cybertron, but property of temple's customers. Built in secret, sparked in secret, raised in secret."

Soundwave watched Jazz bend over backwards in a tight flip that would have been impossible for most Cybertronians. "Your earlier statement 'made to dance', inaccurate. Better phrasing, Jazz 'built to dance'. Jazz designed and constructed for performance purposes, and unofficially sparked after payment to corrupt temple priests. Jazz..."

The music burst in its final crescendo, and Jazz finished his dance with a spin and drop to the floor. Vents wheezing, systems running at high pitch, he remained on his knees and stared at the floor while all echoes faded away. "Just say it," he whispered. "Get it over with."

"Jazz, was slave."

His armor plates shuddered, and he sank out of his pose into a formless huddle on the floor. "Wow. You really can find any secret, can't you?"

"Soundwave, motivated to discover all things about Jazz. Some simple investigations of archives, with deductive reasoning, revealed truth."

"Will you tell him?" Jazz still hadn't looked up, wrapping his arms about his chest. "Or have you already?"

"Reason for concern?"

"Oh, come on. Can't you just hear him already? I can. He'll laugh, and say that it just proves Autobots were meant to be slaves all along. I know him; that's exactly what he would say."

"Megatron, led Decepticon revolution to overthrow corrupt Sigma temples. His stated mission: to free those slaves born from illegal sparking."

"That was then," Jazz said bitterly. "And now, I am being punished for the crime of standing in his way. I am a slave."

Soundwave held no illusions that Megatron would free Jazz, just because of what he'd been, but it still didn't make sense. He moved closer, hating the way Jazz flinched and trembled.

"Jazz, destruction of your club occurred before design of Decepticon sigil. Impossible to know which side dropped missile. And Megatron's cause, to uncover temple corruption and free slaves, surely appealing to you. Jazz made illogical decision, at beginning of civil war. Jazz, should have been Decepticon."

Jazz snorted softly, bleak smile flashing across his face. "Should have been... you're right. I should

have. I knew firsthand about the secret slaves that the Council said didn't exist, and I knew Megatron had set out to stop it. I listened to him a lot, in those early days of the revolution, went to see him too. And I heard the official Council announcements, because you could hardly take a step in that city and not hear 'em. They talked about order, about keeping the peace and following the law. And Megatron talked about tearing down corrupt laws, making everyone equal, and taking power away from those on top to give to those on bottom. Order, peace, equal, power. The only one out of any of 'em who even said the word *freedom* was the new prime. When I escaped slavery, I knew from the very first nanoklik of freedom that I'd never want anything else. That's why I followed Optimus. Maybe it was the illogical decision, but it wasn't the wrong one."

Slowly, so as not to startle Jazz, Soundwave lowered himself to his knees before him. "Will you tell him?" Jazz repeated, more urgently. "Will you?"

"Negative. Some secrets, meant to be kept."

Jazz exhaled. "I really can't believe you found my deepest secret. I left it all behind so long ago."

"The Prime, not told?"

"I didn't tell anyone. Not Prime, not Prowl, not Blaster. You're the only one that knows what happened to the famous dancing slave from Polyhex."

"Affirmative," Soundwave agreed, and gently cupped Jazz's face in his hands to make him look up. "He became mine."

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*"Still not talking?"*

*"We don't get it. So what if he was a slave back then?"*

*"Yeah, he's a slave now. They all are. So what's the big deal?"*

*"Maybe he doesn't know we really don't care."*

*"Yeah, he's still the same Jazz, right?"*

*"Tell him we don't care, boss. Then he'll cheer up."*

*"Right?"*

The loft was quiet. Jazz, as noted by the twins and everyone else, had said nothing since their return from the unrepaired sectors. He went through the motions of their daily shower, and obediently opened his mouth to accept his fuel, but his attention was somewhere else. His gaze kept straying to the wall, blank and unfocused, the gaze of a mech looking back into the past. Eventually he drifted out to Soundwave's balcony and stayed there, slouched moodily over the rail. His silence unnerved the cassettes, who'd become accustomed to Jazz's talkative cheer. Though Soundwave told them all to leave Jazz alone, Laserbeak hopped onto his shoulder and pecked delicately at his wires, hoping to draw out a response. The only one was to shrug her off, and turn away.

That was when Soundwave decided to order Laserbeak's return, and take Jazz on their walk. Of course he was upset, such a reaction was only natural after the shock of Soundwave's revelation, but



this uncharacteristic behavior was as unsettling to Soundwave as it was his symbiotes. Jazz extended his hands when Soundwave approached him with the chains, and followed him out of the loft, all still without speaking. The silence grated on Soundwave, of all mechs, until he finally decided halfway through the market that Jazz had had enough time to mope.

"Jazz, anything to say?"

His slave stopped short three steps ahead of him, and turned. "Should I be saying something? Ah... yes, how forgetful of me. Soundwave: nine." Mockingly he bowed. "Congratulations, you have more points than any of the Seekers did put together, and in less than half the time. What are we playing to, anyway? Ten? If that's the case, then this is getting too close for comfort. Might be time for me to start playing nasty."

A vicious glint flickered through his visor and then Jazz was walking, a little faster now. Soundwave realized he'd misread Jazz's silence, assuming it to be depression.

"Jazz, angry."

"Give the telepath a prize."

"Anger, not understood."

"Seriously? What did you expect, when you went digging into a past that I have done my very best to bury? It was better when it was my mind you were prying into; at least there I had a chance to hold my own. Nosy busybody."

"Jazz," Soundwave said coldly, "in no position to judge uncovering of secrets."

Again Jazz stopped and whipped around, though Soundwave saw the telltale flinch. "That is *different*. I had a right to know what happened to Blaster's little bots, he's my friend and they were on my team. You had no right to poke at the sad story of my illegal sparking, you didn't have to know! It's so old, nobody has to know. It didn't matter!"

"Everything concerning Jazz matters. Jazz, mine."

Jazz snarled in exasperation and strode away again, tugging at his chains as if to yank them off. Soundwave stayed no more than a step behind.

"Jazz, wanted it known."

"*Really.*"

"Jazz, told twins home city-state."

"I did?" Jazz's pace faltered a bit as he lifted his head in thought. "Oh... right. That. The joke was funnier if I told the truth. I also didn't know that you were playing ancient history detective at the time."

"Reason to keep secret, nonexistent," Soundwave pressed. "Former position, slave; current position, slave. Status no different."

"And thank *you*, Soundwave, for saying so. There's no better feeling than knowing, after a lifetime of scraping my way up from the bottom of Cybertron's slag pit, that I've been shoved right back into it. I can always count on you, can't I?"

Soundwave watched Jazz's shoulders droop with misery, even as they kept moving past the stalls, Jazz deaf to the shouts of hopeful merchants. If he was staring into the past again, Soundwave wondered what it was he saw. He put a hand to Jazz's shoulder, forcing him to stop and look properly at Soundwave.

"Former owners, cruel?"

"You mean, were they crueler than the Decepticons. Or you?" he added after a pause. "By what measure are we counting? Who made me take food from hand the most?"

"Physical harm inflicted?" Soundwave asked testily.

"You want to know if they used me for more than dancing. Oh, Soundwave. Where do you think I learned this?" Suggestively Jazz licked the inside of his own wrist joint, a gesture so obscene in the context of Jazz's bitter smile that Soundwave nearly recoiled. "Actually it was their customers I usually bedded, since you're so eager to know the details. I fucked them all, in the rooms above the stage, the special show-after-the-show for our wealthiest patrons. They were all major players in the Cybertron underground, kingpins of the black market. I learned how to eavesdrop on their conversations, overhear the right things, maybe even wheedle information out of them right in the middle of a smoking hot interface. I was a good little slave, and my masters rewarded me for bringing them useful intelligence. It never occurred to them that they were teaching me how to be a very dangerous spy."

"Method of escape?"

Jazz's visor flushed a rich shade of blue, wicked smile curving his lips. "Oh-ohh. Wouldn't you just love to know? Too bad for you that a good magician - and I am one - never reveals his secrets."

He swept his fingertip alongside the edge of the Decepticon symbol on Soundwave's chest, and turned away. He was about to be stopped again, made to face Soundwave, and explain exactly how he escaped his slavery, but Soundwave never got the chance. The high-pitched roar of a jet's engine split the air above them, tiny knick-knacks flying off the tables of vendors as the Seeker barrelled past. Skywarp transformed mid-air and dropped onto the street before them, wings bristled, weapons unlocked. Soundwave's defensive protocols were still waking up when Skywarp tossed him a small object, and Soundwave barely managed to catch it.

"Starscream says you can have this back," Skywarp announced flatly. "Doesn't think it goes with his living room."

It was one of his own spy cameras, already half-crushed by an angry fist. Soundwave stared at it blankly, scrambling to make sense of the impossible, and Skywarp closed the distance between them. "He's already at Headquarters with Megatron. Might want to hurry. In fact, Starscream told me to make sure that you do."

Jazz yelped with surprise when Skywarp hauled him back by the arm and clutched him close against his chest. "Soundw-!" One hand reached out to him, seeking help, and then both Skywarp and Jazz vanished in a burst of purple smoke.



## on a deal

They were all far faster than he was. By the time Soundwave touched down at Decepticon Command, all five of his symbiotes had located and zeroed in on the confrontation in the great hall, quietly infiltrated it, and covered every angle for surveillance. Before Soundwave had reached the doors, he knew exactly how many mecha were inside, that Starscream had gathered at least two dozen seekers, that Shockwave had six drone guards present - not even close to enough - and that Jazz was still in the custody of Starscream's trine. He could hear the shouting before he pushed open the doors, and once he had, the din exploded in his audios. Starscream and Megatron were shouting at one another on the dais, Megatron tellingly not reclining on his throne, but up and armor clamped tight in readiness. Shockwave stood well outside the zone of immediate danger, holding himself carefully still as he eyed the restless mob of seekers. Jazz was trapped between Thundercracker and Skywarp, a few paces away from Starscream, looking justifiably nervous but at least apparently uninjured. The second he saw Soundwave he tried to move toward him, but Skywarp had Jazz's chains wound around his fist and he yanked Jazz back, growling something that Soundwave couldn't hear over the racket.

"These Seekers," Starscream was howling, "were the spark of the Decepticon forces! Air support without which you would never have won the war, and everyone in this room knows it! Have they been shown respect? Treated like the conquering war heroes they truly are? No! Instead their privacy has been invaded, *your spymaster* invading our home and planting cameras to watch us."

He spat the words venomously, accusing finger pointed at the approaching Soundwave. All around him Soundwave could hear the Seekers fidgeting, muttering agreement, instinctively echoing their leader. Suddenly he was the focus of several nasty and threatening glares, but for Soundwave the only thing that mattered was the look on Megatron's face. Fury, frustration, and worst of all *disappointment* etched themselves hard in the lines on Megatron's face, a look that Soundwave had never seen on his leader, at least not directed at him. Inwardly he writhed with humiliation and shame.

"Well Soundwave?" Megatron bit out, every word hard and sharp. "Care to provide us with an explanation?"

Soundwave extended his hand, mangled camera resting on his palm. "This camera, not planted in Starscream's home."

"Funny, that's where I found it!" Starscream hissed, advancing on Soundwave with wings bristled.

"This camera, not placed there," Soundwave insisted, answering Starscream but still gaze fixed on Megatron, pleading for him to believe. "Its discovery, a surprise."

"What, you didn't think I would find it eventually? That I was too stupid to notice it?"

"Negative," Soundwave tried again. "This camera, not placed there by me."

"Of course *you* didn't put it there."

"This camera, not placed there by symbiotes. No orders given to put this in your home."

"You're lying!" Starscream shrieked. "It's one of your cameras, I know it! You think I haven't seen enough of them over the centuries?"

Megatron's face turned harder, and Soundwave forced himself to run a full ventilation.

"Affirmative," he admitted reluctantly. "This camera, mine. However, not responsible for its placement in your home. Its presence there, not understood."

"You just can't believe you screwed up this bad, can you? The great all-listening Soundwave, finally caught spying on m- us," he quickly corrected, ratcheting up his vocalizer's volume to address his audience. "Treating us like the enemy, like Autobots! What are you so afraid of, Megatron? Are we that strong? Are we that dangerous? What's got you so threatened that you have to -"

"Enough!" roared Megatron, and closed the distance between them in two long strides. Starscream flinched, but Megatron's fist flew past him and smashed into Soundwave's jaw. The punch knocked him to the floor, the ugly *clang* echoing in the hall around them. Stunned, the Seekers fell momentarily silent. Shock rebounded through the link of his five symbiotes, quickly hardening to hot, helpless anger. Hastily Soundwave tried to soothe them with pulses of comfort and patience, hoping that Megatron couldn't hear the soft growl reverberating in Ravage's throat.

"It seems," Megatron stated, "that my director of surveillance took his dedication to work a little too far. In so doing, he committed a grave insult against our Air Commander. What do you have to say for yourself, Soundwave?"

His cool, expectant stare met Soundwave's, and made itself understood. Megatron himself had ordered Soundwave to conduct the surveillance, but he had also ordered Soundwave not to be found doing it, and in this task Soundwave had failed him. He would offer no protection now. Stiffly Soundwave picked himself up just enough to kneel properly, head lowered in abject submission.

"Apology offered, Lord Megatron. No insult intended. My actions, unacceptable; your punishment welcomed."

"Don't just think saying sorry makes it any better!" Starscream screeched. "Primus knows how long he's been spying on us. I demand restitution for what's been done."

Megatron's optics flared a little brighter, signaling danger. The Decepticon empire stood on a fine razor's edge, close to splintering into civil war, and Megatron was willing to concede a mistake on Soundwave's part to avoid it. But Megatron wasn't afraid of war either, and if Starscream pushed him over that edge he would strike back. Too much depended on the balance between them, the fate of a world riding on the clash between temper and pride.

“This,” Megatron said slowly, “is Soundwave’s mistake. Therefore, Soundwave will pay for it.”

Abruptly he turned to Skywarp and extended one hand, fingertips gliding lightly down the side of Jazz’s face. Promptly Jazz froze under his touch, ventilations going absolutely still. Soundwave froze too, helplessly watching how Megatron’s gaze shifted from Jazz back to him. He was so angry.

“You can have this slave back. That should satisfy you.”

Soundwave’s spark seized with the simultaneous fury of each his symbiotes, and he knew without looking that Rumble had to clap his hand over Frenzy’s mouth to keep him quiet. Instead he looked at Starscream, and glimpsed the barest flicker of disappointment cross that face. His wings twitched, but just once. Starscream knew as well as Soundwave did that Megatron wouldn’t stand to be pushed much further.

He shrugged nonchalantly. “That’ll do, I suppose. It’s a fair apology.”

Megatron’s optics smoldered, but rather than incite civil war he spun around and stormed out. The Seekers broke their fascinated silence, murmuring amongst themselves, and Skywarp and Thundercracker bumped triumphant fists. “C’mon slave, time for you to come back home.” Cheerfully Skywarp tugged on Jazz’s chains, but Jazz held back.

“No.”

“Say what?” a startled Skywarp asked, at the same time that Starscream said “Excuse me?”

“No, I don’t want to go back with you. I want to stay with Soundwave.”

Skywarp looked about as astonished as Soundwave felt. He gaped at Jazz, then recovered and clouted him hard on the head. “You’re a slave! Nobody cares what you want!” He yanked harder and nearly pulled Jazz right off his feet, but Jazz shoved himself back from Skywarp and tried to bolt.

“Don’t touch me! Soundwave!” Skywarp tackled Jazz before he could get away, wrapping his arms around Jazz’s chest and hauling him straight up off the floor. Jazz thrashed hard, kicking his feet. “Let me go! Soundwave, I don’t want to- mmpf!” Skywarp covered Jazz’s mouth with his hand, then yelped when Jazz bit it.

“Ouch! You fragging little -“

”*Min ta paratas!*“ Jazz babbled desperately. “*Don’t give up. I’m not what Starscream wants, you know that, give him what he wants and you can get me back! You can still fix everything! This isn’t ov-*“

"Oh for Primussake," Starscream snapped, and waved an impatient hand at Jazz. Soundwave recognized the pattern of a one-way transmission, but he didn't realize what Starscream had done until Jazz buckled over Skywarp's arms and screamed. Jazz's collar blinked on, vibrating angrily as it delivered multiple hard shocks to Jazz's internals. Skywarp squawked in dismay and had to drop Jazz before he could be electrocuted. Jazz was convulsing, screaming his vocalizer raw, sparks flying out from between gaps in his armor. Every sound crushed Soundwave's spark a little more, watching his slave writhe in agony and unable to do anything but look. He'd never been this helpless before. Soundwave had never lost what was *his*.

The collar's punishment lasted exactly thirty nanokliks, which must have seemed forever to Jazz, and then it shut down. Jazz collapsed, unconscious, on the floor and the hall was quiet again.

"Starscreeeam," Skywarp wailed. "Whatdja do that for? I coulda handled him alright! Now I can't even touch him for hours!"

"Shut up, Skywarp," Starscream said dismissively. He cocked a vaguely curious optic ridge at Soundwave while wandering past. "What was that all about, I wonder? Sometimes I really can't tell which one of you is more obsessed with the other. Ah well, doesn't matter anymore now, does it? Have a nice day, Surveillance Director."

Careless flick of the wing, and then Starscream followed his jabbering troops out the doors. Skywarp scooped Jazz up - gingerly - and followed, pouting a little. Thundercracker followed, but not without one last hard look at Soundwave.

"And this time, I won't let him play any more games against you."

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The cassettes all darted out of the room, but Soundwave remained very still after the last of the Seekers had gone, listening to their laughter and chatter fade into echoes. So quiet now, without Jazz. Heavy footsteps approached him from the left, but Soundwave did not turn his head to look. He knew well enough who stood beside him.

"What an unseemly display," Shockwave tsked. "Really, I thought the Autobot slaves had learned by now that they live by our generosity, and that they should be happy to serve whichever of the Decepticons Megatron so designates. I'm sure he'll learn to adjust to his new masters soon enough. Such unfortunate timing for you, though, Director Soundwave. Imagine, losing your home, your slave, *and* your standing with Lord Megatron all in one day. I would almost be moved to pity you, if not for the fact that you brought this about due to your own incompetence. You're lucky our Lord was able to avoid civil conflict. Perhaps it's for the best that you move back into the barracks; you've obviously had too many distractions of late."

Ravage alerted him, and Soundwave started moving, one long stride after the other and getting faster with every step. "Director Soundwave?" Shockwave asked uncertainly, still ignored, and then he was left behind as Soundwave exited the hall. Without quite breaking into a run he turned left,

following a less-populated minor corridor, circling Ravage's signal and bearing closer after each turn. Before long he could hear them again, still making a racket in the halls, but now they'd begun to separate and go their different ways. Starscream still hadn't noticed his silent shadow Ravage, wrapped up in his victory and not paying attention to his surroundings. When he passed the doorway of a vacant room, Soundwave was ready to pounce. Moving swiftly, he burst out of the cross passage and shoved Starscream through the door, closing it before Starscream had the chance to gasp or his fellow Seekers to even notice he was gone. He stumbled back, optics flickering rapidly, and opened his mouth to yell.

"This," Soundwave informed him coldly, "not finished." Though Soundwave was not as fast as Starscream, his frame was considerably bulkier, and now he used that bulk to block the doorway, advancing on Starscream one threatening step after another. The shocked expression on Starscream's face was rapidly tucked behind a superior smirk, and he made a show of dusting off wherever Soundwave had touched.

"Isn't it? Megatron seemed very sure. And Primus forbid that the *ever*-obedient Soundwave not be satisfied with Megatron's final ruling. Could it be that you are defying your leader's decision?"

"Facts, still misunderstood. Starscream, this camera not –"

"Oh, save it." Impatiently Starscream pushed aside Soundwave's extended hand, not sparing another glance at the spy camera. "I am not a fool, Soundwave. This is *you* we're talking about, and you don't jump without Megatron's say-so on the when, where, and how high. So if you're spying on me, it's because he ordered it. I know it, you know it, he knows it."

Starscream scowled. "But I couldn't get to him like I wanted to, because he threw you in the way instead. It's very annoying... for me, anyway. For you, it's a disaster. Tough break, but that's how it goes in the Decepticon Empire. You were a pawn, you got played like one, and in the end we got Jazz." He shrugged, and had the nerve to pat Soundwave lightly on the cheek plating. "Don't take it so hard, Soundwave. The Autobots' top tramp is wasted on an icebox like yourself anyway. First thing we're going to do when he wakes up is stuff a gag bar in that overactive mouth. Second thing – well, I'm sure you can guess. Bye now."

Starscream turned to go around Soundwave, and Soundwave moved without thinking. His fist closed over the edge of Starscream's aileron guard and he slammed Starscream against the nearest wall, all his considerable strength bent on keeping him there. Sensors started shutting down as his mind sought out Starscream's, tendrils of consciousness unfurling into his thoughts.

"Oh no you don't!" Starscream choked, and scrambled to brace the point of one null-ray right up against Soundwave's exposed neck. "I know your weakness, mindreader. Creep one more inch into my head and I'll make sure pulling this trigger is the last thing I do before I go down. Will you risk it? For a snarky little trollop who's clocked more time in the berth than all the other slaves combined? Is he really worth it?"

Soundwave stopped his mental advance, but he didn't let up on his grip either, and Starscream did



not have the mass to push him off. The narrow point of his null-ray was still digging into Soundwave's neck cables, but neither of them moved, locked in a silent battle of wills broken only by the noise of their heavy ventilations.

"Jazz," Soundwave said finally, "not desired by Starscream."

"Maybe not, but that's hardly the point now is it? The point was to rally my troops and give them something to get really angry about, to watch Megatron squirm and remember just why it was he courted an alliance with Vos in the first place. We are a force to be reckoned with and he knows it, and he proved it too when he handed over your precious slave. *Had to* hand over your slave. Today Megatron conceded to me, and I don't even care that Jazz is just the consolation prize. I will take my victory however I can."

"If something better offered?"

"You don't have anything better. I might hate the little smart aleck, but my wingmates still want him and I do hate to disappoint them. There's nothing you can give that would make me consider letting go of Jazz a second time."

"Shockwave," Soundwave said simply. "Willing to offer Shockwave."

Starscream stared at him, astonished, then tipped back his head and laughed. The pressure digging into his neck eased off, and Soundwave cautiously backed up enough to allow Starscream freedom of movement. "Oh Soundwave," he got out between giggles. "You are desperate, aren't you?"

Willing to trade the empire's premier for a pint-sized slave that Megatron's probably going to confiscate anyway. I take back what I said - that's more than a fair trade. Too bad that Shockwave is out of reach, even for you. Too much of this city is under his control."

"Starscream, not interested in possibility?" Soundwave asked coolly, ignoring the laughter.

"Starscream, ever known Soundwave to fail?"

That got Starscream's attention, and he looked again at Soundwave with hesitation in his optics.

Hesitation, and something else that Soundwave was all too accustomed to seeing there: greed.

Starscream was too greedy, and hated Shockwave too much, to let this opportunity pass.

"Soundwave, willing to assume full risk," he added. "Cost to Starscream, nothing. If I fail, Seekers retain Jazz. Succeed, and Shockwave's power diminished. Either possibility allows Starscream to win."

Starscream exhaled thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Fine. Surprise me, and maybe I'll think about giving back the bot."

"Negative; return Jazz to my custody now."

“On an impossible promise? Oh I don’t think so; results first, payment second.”

Soundwave thought about Jazz’s limp body, cradled in Skywarp’s arms, still unconscious according to Laserbeak’s surveillance. Even if he did not have reason to suspect Jazz was in for a thoroughly unpleasant waking, he worried about the effect of the collar’s punishment. They might have been designed to punish without damage, but scorched wiring was still a possibility, particularly when the punishment lasted so long.

“Allow Jazz to recover from collar in Constructicon medbay,” he offered as a compromise.

“Territory, neutral. Will not remove him- will not approach him,” he added quickly, at Starscream’s arch look, “until Starscream satisfied.”

Starscream fell silent again, thinking, while Soundwave tried to wait patiently. Laserbeak was tailing Skywarp and Thundercracker to their home, and every second that passed brought Jazz closer to the Seeker towers. Once he’d vanished inside, Soundwave feared, he might never be able to see Jazz again. They were just coming up on the edge of their grounds when Starscream finally activated his comm, linking into external amplification.

“Skywarp, Thundercracker, change of plans. Take Jazz to Hook’s medbay.”

“What?” Skywarp squawked. “Why?”

“But don’t leave him there, stay and keep an optic on him. Make sure no one –“ He threw a significant look at Soundwave. “– but a medic goes anywhere near him.”

“But why?”

“Yeah Starscream,” Thundercracker put in, clearly suspicious. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t ask questions, just do as I say. And stop whining, Skywarp, he’ll be no good for another joor anyway.” He switched off the link before his wingmates could respond, and smirked at Soundwave.

“That’s how long you have to dazzle me. You better hope I’m impressed.” He tipped a mock salute his way and sailed out the door, leaving Soundwave alone again.

*"Symbiotes, return to office now. Much work to be done."*

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They burst into his office in an explosion of noise, their panic and anger amplified from having been pent up in silence too long. What Buzzsaw and Ravage could not express out loud, Rumble and Frenzy more than made up for, and the cacophony of furious hisses, clicks, and shouting filled his office.

"Those fragging Seekers, they -"

"- it's not your fault -"

*"Master, unfairly punished -"*

" - can't do this, can he?"

"What's gonna happen now? Boss? You're not just gonna let the Seekers take Jazz away, are you?"

"You can't! Jazz is *ours* now, you can't let him go!"

"Hush," Soundwave snapped, a surge of firm authority rolling through the link. "Panicking unnecessary, and unhelpful. Energy, better spent on repairing damage."

"This is so unfair," Frenzy growled. He'd subsided like his brothers at Soundwave's command, but Soundwave could still feel the bitter resentment throbbing in his small spark. "It's not your fault, none of it! Megatron's the one who told you to spy on Starscream. Now he acts like he doesn't know a thing, and punishes you instead! It's not fair, it's *not fair*."

"Megatron's orders: not be discovered," Soundwave reminded them all. "This task, failed. Explanation for camera's presence on Seeker grounds?"

"We didn't put it there, boss, we swear."

"We don't know where that came from!"

"You told us that only Ravage would watch Starscream, and we stayed away from the towers like you said to." Helplessly Rumble gestured to Ravage, the best and oldest of Soundwave's spies. His clear, absolute confidence could be heard by all of them, leaving no room for doubt. Ravage would never be so sloppy as to leave a camera where it could be found, nor would he need to put it there in the first place. One with the shadows, he could infiltrate a home and spy on its inhabitants whenever he chose, and relied strictly on his own recording equipment.

"Starscream probably put it there himself," Frenzy muttered. "It's the sort of thing he'd do."

"Or Shockwave, wouldn't he just love to see the boss fry?"

Soundwave thought the meticulously rule-abiding Shockwave a very unlikely suspect, but his symbiotes were right that it was exactly the sort of thing Starscream would do. The only problem was that the wall in this office was covered in monitors showing feeds from cameras all over Iacon,

and every one was active. None were missing. Soundwave could not imagine how Starscream would have managed to get the camera, but it was pointless to worry about that now. The damage was done.

"Boss? Now what? What are we gonna do?"

"Now," Soundwave answered, a good deal more calmly than he felt, "must reclaim Jazz. Starscream, willing to trade him for correct price."

"A price?"

"Like what?"

At that moment, before Soundwave could activate his vocalizer, Laserbeak contacted them all at once. "*Jazz, awake.*"

Everyone stiffened, and without needing to be asked Laserbeak patched her external audio feed into her comlink. Through her they heard the sounds of the medbay, the soft whimpers of pain, and Jazz stirring on his berth. His scratchy, raw voice was low, but they all heard what he said first.

"Sndw-v?" Jazz whispered. "Soundwave?"

"Jazz?" The little slave medic had heard him too, and moved closer to the berth. "Are you awake? Don't try to -"

"Soundwave? Soundwave!" The stirring became more agitated, and Soundwave heard the sound of limbs scrabbling against the berth rails, Jazz trying to push himself upright. Almost immediately he screamed and collapsed back against the berth, panting hard.

"- move," First Aid finished with a sigh. "Jazz, please lie still. Your collar was activated and your internal wiring is going to be painfully sensitive for several hours."

"Where's Soundwave?"

"You don't care where he is anymore," drawled Skywarp, who must have also been in the room. "I'm your master again, remember? Tonight you're coming home with us, and baby, I got plans."

"Oh?" Jazz croaked. "And do those plans assume you solved that problem of premature overloading?"

First Aid squeaked as he was brushed aside, and then came the telltale metallic smack of Skywarp

backhanding Jazz hard across the face. Soundwave winced.

"You wanna see how I overload, slave? We don't have to wait. I'll- hey! TC!"

"Forget it, Warp." Thundercracker's voice was flat and disinterested as he dragged his wingmate away from the berth. "He was trying to goad you into it, but if you rub wires with him right now you'll get electrocuted. C'mon, it's stuffy in here."

Some minor scuffling ensued, but eventually the complaining Skywarp allowed himself to be dragged out of the room. First Aid exhaled, his voice shaking a little.

"Wh-what's going on, Jazz? Why did Skywarp say you belong to him again? What happened today?"

"Bad things," Jazz said shortly, still trying to draw a full ventilation. "Where's Soundwave? I need Soundwave!"

"Jazz, he's not here."

"Yes he *is*. He wouldn't leave me, I know he wouldn't! Soundwave, *please*." Jazz's voice cracked on the last word and he swallowed another cry of pain, ignoring First Aid's pleas to lie still. "I know you're listening! Where are you?"

Soundwave's grip had tightened on the edge of his console without his knowing, every word twisting his distress a little more tightly. His carrier protocols were going crazy, demanding he go to Jazz and protect him, cassette or not. Jazz was *his*, and needed him, but he could not go. Somehow he forced himself to sit still in his chair.

"Can we go?" Rumble asked, knowing full well his master's stress. "Beak can't talk to him, not in a way he can understand. Let us go, Soundwave."

Reluctantly Soundwave shook his head. "In exchange for Jazz's treatment in medbay, promise made not to approach him."

"We'll be careful! We won't let the Seekers see us, promise. C'mon, Soundwave, listen to him- he's out of his mind because he doesn't know what's going on. At least let us go so we can tell him what's happening. Please?"

"Please," Jazz echoed, ragged with pain. He sounded close to sobbing. "Soundwave..."

What little resistance he could muster against his own protocols broke, and Soundwave gave in to

instinct. "Go. Take care not to be seen."

"Yes, Boss!" The twins scrambled to flee the office, thrusters firing before the door had even closed behind them. Soundwave knew they wouldn't waste a nanoklik in getting to the Constructicon medbay, but quiet infiltration had never been their strong suit. He worried, but it was a small worry compared to the slow crush of panic in his spark. So much had been destroyed, and there was so little time to repair the damage - if he could at all. Wretchedly he listened to Jazz continue to cry out for him.

"Buzzsaw, now dispatched to surveillance of Starscream. Provide alert if Starscream moves in direction of Constructicon medbay."

"*Understood.*" Buzzsaw dipped his head in acknowledgement, then took his leave.

"Ravage -"

Ravage interrupted with a surge of denial, bumping his head against Soundwave's knee joint. He did not want to be sent away for basic surveillance, he preferred to stay by Soundwave's side. His end of the link was thick with worry for his master, and fierce protectiveness. His undying loyalty was a comfort, and Soundwave glided his hand over Ravage's small head.

"Ravage, dislikes Jazz."

*Hate/distrust* Ravage clarified. But right now Soundwave could sense he was not really concerned with Jazz, only furious at the humiliation that Soundwave had been forced to endure and afraid of what else might come. Soundwave relented and allowed him to stay, sparing a few moments to stroke his armor before he turned his attention to the console. Information long since locked away in his personal files sprang onto the screen, waiting to be used. He began the process of compiling it into a report, only subconsciously noting that Jazz's cries had trailed off and he was quiet again. After most of a breem, his attention diverted back to the medbay when he heard First Aid's voice pipe up again.

"Jazz? I'm back; are you still awake? I don't know why they're letting me treat you, but this pain buffer will help you feel better."

"No!" Something clattered, like Jazz had struck something out of First Aid's hands. "No meds! I can't afford to fall asleep now."

"But Jazz, you should be resting. Your systems need time to -"

"Where are the Seekers?"

"They're waiting out in the main treatment room."

"Can they see us?" Jazz dropped his voice to a whisper, and Soundwave realized he must not be able to even lift his head to look. Unconsciously mimicking Jazz, First Aid dropped his voice too.

"Yes."

"Can they hear us?"

"No, the walls are soundproof."

"Alright then; no sudden moves." Soundwave could hear the tentative footsteps of the medic, and assumed Jazz had beckoned him closer. His voice remained soft. "Laserbeak is right over your head."

So this was the reason he'd calmed down. Soundwave could feel Laserbeak's satisfaction in establishing contact. First Aid drew a quick intake of air, and Jazz hissed, "I said not to move!"

"Sorry, sorry. How did you know?"

"I can hear her clucking at me. She does that when she's worried." Jazz chuckled, then groaned a little for the pain it must have caused. "Okay darlin', one for yes and two for no. Is Soundwave listening?"

Cautiously Laserbeak tapped her beak against a rafter, just once.

"Is he alright?"

*Tap.*

"Has he given up?"

*Tap, tap.*

"Didn't think so." Soundwave could almost see the wry grin that he knew flashed across Jazz's face. "Are you alone?"

*Tap, tap.*

"Rumble? Or Frenzy? Someone that can give me a few more details on current events?"

*Tap.*

"Where? Are they trying to get to me now?"

*Tap.*

"My would-be masters are in the way, no doubt," Jazz sighed. "Aid, you know where Mixmaster keeps the good stuff?"

"Yes..."

"Go get two cubes of it. Make sure Thundercracker and Skywarp are paying attention to the drinks instead of this room, you got that?"

"Jazz, no." First Aid sounded bewildered, and afraid. "Please, I don't understand any of this but I can't- don't ask me -"

"Not askin'," Jazz said sharply, more sharply than Soundwave had ever heard him speak to a fellow slave. "I'm orderin'. Do it, and do it now. We probably don't have a lot of time."

"Time for what, though?"

"Go!"

First Aid whimpered, but Soundwave heard the door slide open and his footsteps retreating. Half a breem later, he distantly heard the timid bot offering the Seekers a drink. Rumble and Frenzy used the distraction as their chance to creep into Jazz's room, and slid the door shut behind them.

"Jazz? You okay?"

"It sucks slag what happened to you, but it's not our fault -"

"Soundwave didn't leave that camera -"

"Never mind that. Give me news, please. What's going on out there? Why am I here instead of Skywarp's berth chamber?"



"The boss managed to hook Starscream with some kind of deal. He got you this far, now he's working on getting you all the way home."

"Deal?" Jazz repeated in disbelief. "Soundwave? What kind of deal?"

"Uh yeah, boss. You said Starscream would give Jazz back if you gave him something, but what?"

"Shockwave," Soundwave answered through the comlink. "Promised exchange: Shockwave."

"Shockwave?" both twins repeated incredulously, but where they were blank with incomprehension, Jazz understood perfectly.

"The enforcers?" he asked. "Their wages?"

"Affirmative," he answered, and aloud the twins told him, "Yeah."

"It's not enough, love. You told me yourself it wasn't enough."

Soundwave looked at the data assembling itself on a datapad, lines and lines of damning statistics, all of it the same information he'd been hoarding for megacycles. No, it wasn't enough, he knew that, but what else could he do?

"Nothing else to give," he said, and he heard Rumble relay his answer to Jazz.

"Then what would be enough?"

"Disaster. So far, only result of these policies is widespread bribery and tension. However, someday this policy will result in disaster. Starscream, intelligent enough to understand this. If patient, Starscream can wait -"

"Soundwave."

Something in Jazz's tone made Soundwave hesitate. "Jazz?"

"I need you to stop listening now."

"Huh?" said both twins in unison, echoing Soundwave's surprise.

"Explain."

"Can't do that, love, you don't want to know. It would... compromise you."

Soundwave sat straight up in his chair, alarms ringing in his mind. "Jazz, confess intentions now."

"You can't lie about what you don't know, right? You just keep putting that intel together, and I'll do the rest."

"Jazz -"

"Please, Soundwave." Jazz sounded exhausted; Soundwave could hear the pain in his voice with every word. "I know you don't trust me. But what else can you do? Let me help you; I *want* to help you. Just this once, *trust me*. Don't you want me to come home?"

Oh yes, Soundwave wanted his slave to come home so badly. He wanted to have a home for him to come home *to*. Too many Decepticons were circling him all at once, waiting for him to fall, and once he had they would make sure he never had the chance to get up. He would fight them all, to protect what was his, and to fight them all he must use all his weapons. It was only the logical - if foolhardy and treasonous - choice to make.

Not knowing whether he was making the smartest or worst decision in his life, Soundwave cut all communications to his symbiotes. He could feel Ravage's stare boring into him as he did so.

*Dangerous/risky* were the thoughts circling in the mind of his eldest, not anything Soundwave did not already know. But overriding the suspicion and disapproval was a question of *distance*?

Soundwave was walking a dangerous road, and Ravage wanted to know just how much farther he was willing to go.

"Enough," Soundwave said, both as answer and as end to the conversation. "Jazz mine, and I do not lose what's mine. Ravage, knows this better than all symbiotes."

He turned his attention back to the console, and his completed download. All of Soundwave's carefully culled information on the bribes, and favors, and culture of corruption within Enforcement were ready, correlated to the official documentation of the lawkeepers' wages. That last part, though, had come from his own data. He initiated contact with the public mainframe to download the real-time data, then paused. Something was different about the files, they'd been modified too recently.

The numbers had changed too, reflecting a modest but comfortable wage of two energon cubes per cycle.

Shockwave had altered his enforcer department's own records. That realization alone surprised Soundwave, and afforded him a small glimmer of amusement. His comments had actually made the Premier nervous enough to try and cover his own tracks, essentially confessing he knew what a mistake he'd made. It was, of course, a futile effort to hide any electronic record from Soundwave's sight; he would find the real data, and the algorithms used to erase it, and present all of it to Starscream. It would not take long. He poised his fingertips over the console keys, prepared to begin, and that's when he received the transmission.

*"Soundwave."* Megatron's voice was cold and hard as frozen rock. *"My chambers. Now."*

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## on insurrection

He had been here before. Soundwave faced the door to Megatron's personal apartments, dread slowly squeezing his spark, and thought about the last time he'd come to this door. Megatron had been upset, and angry, but not at him. He'd listened to Soundwave, respected his opinion, and been reassured by it. Even if Soundwave hadn't heard the cold fury in Megatron's summons, he knew he could expect no such treatment tonight. In such a short amount of time, so much had changed for the worse.

The keylock had already scanned his presence, but no one had come to open the door. After waiting for a full breem, Soundwave tentatively pushed at it and found it open. There was only silence on the other side, and he entered the empty entry room as quietly as possible. Still no one came forward, either Megatron or one of his Autobot slaves, and he crossed the distance to reach Megatron's main receiving chamber. He at first thought that room must be empty too, but then Megatron emerged from his mixing bar, cube in hand. Hard grade, going by the tint, which Megatron threw back in a single gulp, then slammed the cube against the wall to disperse it. Soundwave barely managed not to jump, and when Megatron's steel-hard gaze landed on him, he bowed.

No response. Megatron simply looked at him, expectantly, and after a brief but tense wait Soundwave lowered himself to his knees. Satisfied, Megatron finally spoke.

"I never thought," he began, "that you would be the one to fail me, Soundwave. The others, I expected. Starscream is always paying more attention to what he thinks he can get than what's in front of him... and there's Shockwave, who can't even cope with a changing environment let alone conquer it. One can't be trusted not to shoot me, the other can't be trusted to shoot anything. But you – you were my one follower that did not have those flaws. You were the soldier I trusted to do things *right*."

With no warning he burst into movement, covering the distance between them in two long strides. His fist smashed into Soundwave's head for the second time that day, knocking him over. Damage reports, both new and from the first blow, spun frantically through Soundwave's readout and he dismissed them, scrambling to get back up onto his knees. "I asked for one thing!" Megatron barked. "Watch Starscream - don't let him know. Is that really so difficult? So impossible? To keep one optic on that treacherous, scheming, *preening* Decepticon? You've infiltrated the base of Optimus Prime himself without the enemy every knowing! But you couldn't manage to stay out of sight of a Seeker more in love with his own reflection than anything else in this world!" He backhanded Soundwave hard across the face, nearly knocking him over again. "Pathetic. I expected so much more from you.

"Winning the war made you sloppy, Soundwave. Made you careless. Do you even know how close this empire came to splitting in half today? Do I have to explain *any* of this to the mech I put in charge of surveillance and intelligence?"

Soundwave struggled not to flinch when Megatron's fist barreled towards his head again, but this

time Megatron snatched his chin and held it, forcing him to look up. Megatron bent closer, the dark glow in his optics boring directly into Soundwave. His voice was low, and thick with rage.

"I had to... concede something to Starscream today. I had to apologize. I am *Megatron*, lord of all Cybertron! I shouldn't have to concede anything!" With a snarl he threw Soundwave aside in disgust. "What do you have to say for yourself? And don't start with that business about not putting it there, I am in no mood for excuses."

Shaken, Soundwave tried to ignore his error messages and concentrate. Nobody in the Decepticon army, Soundwave included, had gone without at least an occasional impatient cuff from Megatron's fist. Actual beatings this thorough were less frequent, but not rare either. Soundwave had never been forced to endure one, but he had witnessed several. Often Starscream, sometimes others, he had watched them all scream and crumple under Megatron's unforgiving temper. Every time, they tried to argue. Every time, they tried to defend themselves and their actions. Inevitably, by the time Megatron was through, they were admitting fault and begging for mercy. Soundwave had often wondered, since everyone knew exactly what was coming, why they simply didn't dispense with the futile argument and move straight on to begging. It might not always be right, but it was at least efficient and logical, and ended the beatings far more quickly. Why stick stubbornly to an argument that would only bring pain and misery?

Now, staring at the massive pedes before him, Soundwave knew better. It was surprisingly difficult to listen to blame for something he'd never done. Megatron was punishing him for a mistake he would have never committed even on his most careless day, and not only did Soundwave know it, he knew Megatron should have known that too. He wanted to protest, and argue, and make his leader see reason.

Determinedly Soundwave buried the urge to do so. It would earn him nothing but more punishment, and he had so little time. Submissively he bowed his head. "Lord Megatron's disappointment in my service, distressing. Your approval has great meaning, always sought. No intention to cause my lord pain, or threaten stability of empire. No apology sufficient.

"Circumstances of camera's location, still unknown," he went on to say, then hurried to add more when he sensed Megatron tensing. "But, acknowledged, Soundwave failed in assigned task. Responsibility, completely mine. Please, my lord, show mercy."

There was no immediate answer, and Soundwave dared to look up. Megatron was studying him, considering the request. "I forgave you for the sulking disappearances. I forgave you for missing a giant Autobot sigil splattered across my own statue. Soundwave... I don't know how you can expect forgiveness for this."

"Not expected; only pleaded. Megatron, powerful leader. Service to you, highest honor. Soundwave, willing to forsake any privilege to remain your soldier. If my lord chooses to reduce estate, reduce rank... to take home." Soundwave had to clear his vocalizer, but he kept going. "Such judgment, only fair."

*Only please don't take Jazz.*

He did not dare voice that aloud, but all the same he had a strange feeling Megatron knew what he was thinking anyway. Silence fell again, while Megatron circled him, and Soundwave kept his gaze on the floor and fought not to tremble. He also tried not to think about how much time he was losing, or the incomplete datapad in his office, or Jazz lying in the medbay. Eventually Megatron grabbed the nearest chair and dragged it closer so he could sit, staring down at Soundwave with a thoughtful air.

“For what nearly happened today, I should take everything from you. I won’t, because I am generous and I know how useful you’ve been to me in the past. But Soundwave, you have a distraction problem. And if I must, I *will* beat it out of you.”

He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, optics narrowing. “Or, you can tell me that I dealt with that distraction already when I gave Jazz back to the Seekers.”

The terrible knowing in his gaze pinned Soundwave to the floor. Panic brushed at his spark, but outwardly his only reaction was to shake his head. “Jazz, never a distraction from official duties. Work, always takes precedence. Jazz, only a distraction from failure to sustain first Autobot slaves. His behavior, lively; his attentions, pleasing. Progress made in training him, extensive. Please, Lord Megatron, reconsider –“

“Reconsider what? Giving away the shiny little bot that graced your berth? I warned you before, Soundwave, he was only ever there because I allowed it. I no longer do. Jazz is more prize than you deserve.”

Soundwave bowed his head even lower, almost to the floor. “Agreed, Lord Megatron. Jazz, more than I deserve. However, if my lord will have enough pity to return him regardless, Soundwave will give anything that is asked.”

He knew he’d made a mistake as soon as he looked up. Rage flashed through Megatron’s optics and he lunged half out of his chair, grabbing Soundwave by the neck and hauling him up to face Megatron directly. The abrupt pressure on his neck cables made him choke, and he had to struggle not to fight back, to push himself free. “*What is he to you?*” he roared. “Is he more than a toy? Is he more than your *leader*?”

“Never,” Soundwave hurried to deny, under a hail of damage alerts. He couldn’t quite stand or kneel, and Megatron was holding up his entire weight by the iron grip around his neck. “Never more – Soundwave, only loyal to Megatron. Jazz, only a slave. Soundwave, worked very hard to train slave to obedience... please, Lord Megatron.” Desperately he pressed an open hand against his own chest compartment. “This model, built to capture and keep others. Adopted charges, once taken in, not easily released. Core programming forbids it. Inclination to keep Jazz, a result of base coding.”

This pain was excruciating. He did his best to hold still in Megatron’s grasp, not even allowing

himself to gulp. What he'd just said was truth, but not all of it, and Soundwave was afraid Megatron was staring into him so hard that somehow he would see it. What was that look in his optics? Anger? Suspicion? Jealousy?

The awful silence was broken by a crackle from this room's comm station. "Lord Megatron, this is Enforcement Co-Commander Blitzwing on emergency channel x23, requesting immediate response."

"Not now," Megatron snapped. "I'm busy."

"Sir, I respectfully suggest –"

"I said not now!"

"Sir." The voice filtering through the comm station was audibly stressed, and Soundwave wondered how long he'd been trying to contact Megatron on his personal comlink before resorting to this. "I have to insist on now. Some disorder has broken out in the commercial districts. We thought we had it under control, but then a new –"

"Send the lawkeepers, that's what they're there for!"

"All enforcement officers have been deployed, Lord Megatron, but they've had no effect and the violence is starting to spread. Astrotrain and I are both convinced we need more force to contain the riot. We request your command for Decepticon mobilization."

Megatron ground his denta, but dropped Soundwave to the floor and stepped over him to get to his console. "Busy day for mutinies," Soundwave heard him mutter, and then Megatron slapped his hand against the comm console for a wideband channel. "All Decepticons! Report for duty at coordinates broadcast by Blitzwing. Some civilians apparently need a reminder of the empire they serve. Starscream will assume field command until stated otherwise. I expect everyone there in under one breem; move out."

He switched off the channel, then turned back to Soundwave. "I don't think we're quite done here, but luck is on your side, Soundwave. Make yourself useful and help bring down this rabble. We'll finish this later."

He strode out of the room, and Soundwave scrambled to follow.

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Soundwave's first impression of the commercial district was that the city itself had gone insane.

Blitzwing's bland descriptions didn't begin to cover the chaos now boiling out of every alleyway and sidestreet. Frantic mecha stampeded in every direction, in no apparent cooperation with each other,

trampling both stalls and bodies in their panic. Soundwave had long associated the word 'riot' with the political demonstrations orchestrated by Megatron in the early revolution, a mass of angry mecha marching in the streets to make their demands. This had no organization or purpose like those did, and amounted to nothing but pure pandemonium. From above, the mecha swirled in the streets like Earth's ocean, and Soundwave watched them break against the oncoming Decepticons like a wave against rocks.

To face battle was both strange and familiar at the same time. The Decepticons had not known true combat in years. There were regular drills, of course; military-built models couldn't survive without at least the occasional maneuvers exercise held outside the city. They had practiced their shooting and their knife-fighting in casual routine, surrounded by friends and banter but no live fire. Now the clock turned backward. Long-dormant battle protocols activated themselves, and weapons that had been silent hummed to life. Soundwave fell back into old habits with curious ease, marking a channel for battlefield communication, distributing the frequency, then locking it from outsider's prying audios. Not that there was much danger of that with this crowd. Odd as it felt to move into combat again, it was odder still to face off against an enemy that was not Autobot. They had no strategy forming their movements, no key officers to target, and - as Soundwave quickly confirmed - absolutely no idea how to fight.

Barking orders at his air troops, Starscream directed trines of Seekers to sweep the streets, raking the crowds with laserfire. Unlucky mecha fell to the ground while the rest of the rioters screamed and clambered over each other to escape. Elsewhere, the Constructicons waded easily through thickets of mecha, knocking them down without effort. These were no soldiers, only civilians who'd begun a battle they couldn't finish. Wherever Soundwave looked, they fell before Decepticons. Yet the Decepticons were outnumbered one to a hundred, and no matter how many of them fell the crowds had still more. The city's panic thrived, and Megatron raged at all of them *"to put an end to this now, or by Primus you will share their fate!"*

Positioned in a relatively empty cross street, Soundwave turned his attention away from his surroundings and toward wider surveillance, opening his links with the aerials to a high dataflow.

Laserbeak and Buzzsaw skimmed over the top of the roiling crowd, images and sounds streaming back to Soundwave. Through them, he saw some civilians cooperating enough to throw scrap junk into the mouths of alleyways, building impromptu barricades. They were defending themselves not against Decepticons, but from small bands of enforcers. He watched merchants scrambling to haul boxes of their goods to safety while the lawkeepers shot at them and stole their property. On other streets the lawkeepers sheltered merchants and struggled to help them hide their property in time.

And everywhere, wherever they could, boxdwellers from the ghettos simply looted and robbed as much as they could carry. Soundwave was startled out of his surveillance when a hysterical minibot crashed into his actual body, shouting at the top of his vocalizer.

"They're coming for our tables! They're coming for our tables! Shockwave has- oof!" He hit Soundwave so hard, he toppled backward and would have fallen if Soundwave hadn't snatched his wrist. With casual strength he lifted, letting the little bot dangle midair, and watched those terrified gold optics blanch to nearly pure white.

"Repeat statement," Soundwave ordered, but the minibot, suddenly face to face with a Decepticon in the worst way, was too dumbstruck to produce anything other than a gulping squeak. Impatiently Soundwave dropped him and he scrambled to escape, scurrying away like a hunted technimal.

Soundwave didn't bother to shoot him in the back, though he could have. His cries only confirmed what Soundwave already knew, and had known since the moment Blitzwing's voice sounded in



Megatron's home. This riot was nothing more than the logical conclusion of the festering tensions between merchants and lawkeepers. Soundwave had watched the pressure build for orns, and now it had burst like an overheated boiler. It was nothing less than inevitable.

As for the timing of it, well. Soundwave was no fool, and he had not missed the elder twins' rather conspicuous absence from the battle. His attention split between monitoring the aerials' surveillance and his own monitoring of the airwaves, scanning the unguarded channels. Broadcasts were flying through the air fast and furious, as panicking mecha tried to contact friends. Some insisted that the enforcers were descending on the city, betraying the illegal merchants to Shockwave. Others said Shockwave had come to arrest the merchants, depriving the enforcers of their blackmail income.

The conflicting rumors had triggered a complicated three-way riot in which no side could trust the other, and was therefore about as ugly and unfixable a mess that Soundwave could expect from Jazz. Carefully he peeled away and discarded from his recordings any mention of two tiny loud-mouthed mechs running through the streets, yelling the news with gleeful urgency.

*"Lord Megatron." Effortlessly he opened up a new channel for direct contact, bypassing the battle channel with its military chatter. "This warning necessary; do not rely on intelligence or promised support from Enforcement agents."*

*"What? Why not?"*

*"Reasons complicated. Electronic and physical surveillance indicates enforcers have own agenda, cannot be considered trustworthy battle allies. Decepticons must be warned." Soundwave sensed Megatron's automatic disbelief, and pressed harder. "Full explanation, available later. Soundwave, not prone to irrational guessing. Safety of Decepticons and effective battle strategy require acknowledgement. Enforcement must be treated as possible hostiles, especially those of lowest rank. Understood?"*

"Very well," Megatron said grudgingly, and seconds later Soundwave heard the warning broadcast on their general channel. Soundwave followed up by marking the three latest buildings he'd flagged for black market activity, and forwarding them to Megatron and Starscream as likely hot spots. The Decepticon strategy began to shift, selecting targets with greater care. Soundwave poured more attention back into the datastreams from his scouts, seeking suitable strike points for the Seekers, and lost all but peripheral awareness for his actual surroundings. That he'd held onto that much was probably what saved his life in the next breem when, sensing the danger, he dropped and ducked behind a corner before plasma fire nearly melted his head.

Focus snapped back to his immediate surroundings and he crouched behind his cover, weapons unlocked and ready to trigger. His attackers - two of them, from what he could hear - scrambled back behind an overturned shuttle.

"Go back to your towers, Decepticon!" one of them hollered. "Stupid aristocrat. We had a good thing going, why do you Cons have to come and wreck that too?"

They tried to peer over their cover enough to fire, and yelped when Soundwave's rifle nearly clipped them. His battle surveillance was being delayed, and if he were to be useful for the remainder of the

battle he must eliminate this threat quickly. Annoyed, Soundwave started examining the surroundings, calculating side angles he might make use of. What he would have preferred was to have Ravage at his side, neutralizing minor threats like this so he could pay more attention to his primary task, but his oldest symbiote was even more mysteriously absent than his younger brothers right now. Soundwave ignored the hail of insults still being flung at him and backed away, making use of the half-demolished building behind him to cut a path around the enemy. They knew nothing of combat, and usefully provided him with the shouting he needed to keep tabs on their location, not even thinking to guard their flanks as he moved into position. One shot was enough to blow the first of them right off his pedes and into the dust, the second tried to bolt and took the shot on his kibble instead. With a scream he toppled face-forward, howling pathetically as Soundwave strode forward. He had suspected both would be enforcers, and he was right. In fact, he was fairly certain he recognized this one as the enforcer that had chased Laserbeak through the market and drawn a weapon on her. Was it really because he didn't recognize her as a Decepticon? Or was it because, as a Decepticon, she'd come too close to his own private business of extortion that day?

"Quiet," Soundwave ordered, and the anguished screams cut short. Trembling, the enforcer stared up at him and Soundwave bent closer, ensuring he had the mech's full attention. "Firing upon Decepticon, act of treason. Also, act of futility and idiocy."

"I'm sorry," he gasped. "It's the riot - they're out of control, we got scared and didn't know who to trust, please don't kill m-"

Soundwave clamped one massive hand over the blast gun wired into his arm, and tore it right off. It was only a cheap modification, probably installed so he could apply for enforcement, and came loose with a few sparks and the snap of nerve wires. The enforcer shrieked in agony, and would have kept on shrieking if Soundwave hadn't clouted him hard across the temple with his own useless gun. He collapsed, finally silent, and at the same time Soundwave's comlink came to life with Megatron's voice.

*"All Decepticons, the crowds have begun to scatter. This battle is not finished until the streets are empty and curfew in place, no questions asked. Arrest whatever you don't kill. I will tell you when we've finished. And when we are, everyone will report to me."*

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It took them joors to completely subdue the city. Civilians were not willing to fight Decepticons, but they were willing to loot shops, start fires, and attack one another for the sake of stealing whatever could be had. Heavily outnumbered, there was little the Decepticons could do but wait for the panicked adrenaline to run its course. Spraying laser fire into the crowds dropped a few victims and scattered the rest, who would regroup on the next street until they too were shot. Eventually rioters tired, and retreated into their (or someone's) homes, and thieves who couldn't work under cover of the massive crowds vanished right after. Every public frequency in the city carried Megatron's command for curfew, and the brutal warning that anyone caught disobeying would be executed on sight. Shots dwindled, shouts faded away, and the minor fires were smothered.

Peace came back to Iacon, but it was a frigid, unnaturally silent peace. Through initial sweeps, Soundwave estimated there must be at least a hundred dead, and five times that many seriously

injured. Added together, that was close to one percent of Cybertron's official population. Still more had been taken into custody, by those Decepticons willing to pause and arrest someone rather than shoot him. En masse, they were shoved into the city's jail until it was bursting. Luckily by that time the streets had emptied, and Megatron declared the battle won. Though no Decepticon had been seriously wounded, enough of them were reporting minor injuries that he ordered their regrouping in the Constructicons' medbay. Small squads having been dispatched the patrol the city, Soundwave joined the other Decepticons crowding into Hook's primary treatment room. His first instinct, of course, was to look for Jazz, but there was no sign of him in any of the recovery rooms.

He just barely heard the soft cough at his elbow, over the racket of the soldiers. Looking very small amongst all the Decepticons, First Aid hovered behind Soundwave and cleared his throat again. When Soundwave looked, his visor blanched and he dropped his gaze to the floor.

"I, uh, moved Jazz into an old storage room further back, sir. Jazz said you would want that."

"Status?"

"He's fine, sir, or he will be. Though he's still in a lot of pain and can't walk yet, there's no serious damage done to his wiring. Actually..." Tentatively First Aid lifted a hand, gaze flicking upward. "I couldn't help but notice, some of the cables in your neck -"

"Runt!" Hook bellowed, from somewhere on the other side of the medbay, and First Aid jumped. He bowed and scurried back to his master, who was barking orders at both his brothers and his slave with equal exasperation. Barely had he fled when Ravage slunk silently into his place, unnoticed by anyone around them. In a sulky sort of way, he dipped his head and plucked a datapad out of subspace. No, not just a datapad – *the* datapad upon which Soundwave had compiled all his data on the lawkeepers. Soundwave switched it on, and saw that it was now complete. The true wages for the enforcers had been pulled straight from the enforcement office terminal itself, along with a track log of all the inappropriate fiddling done to conceal them in the first place.

Ravage's glare dared him to say a word. Amused, Soundwave had no need to, but gently needled Ravage's side of the link with affection and gratitude. The response was a haughty toss of the head, an image-laden reminder that Ravage despised Jazz, and to stalk away. The loyalty of his eldest had been a hard fight to win, but Soundwave would not sell it for any price. Ravage was faithful to the end.

"Enough!" Megatron snarled somewhere on the far side of the room, shrugging off Hook with a violent swipe of the arm. The medic promptly made himself scarce, and the nearest Decepticons all backed away as Megatron strode to the center of the room. "Today was not a good day for my empire, Decepticons. I conquered this planet to bring it stability, and order, not watch it spontaneously combust around me. Fires in the streets, mobs trampling the enforcers, factories overrun and my energon storage vaults attacked! Do any of you think what happened today was acceptable? Is anyone here *proud* of Decepticon rule?"

He smashed a heavy fist into the nearest flat surface, buckling it without effort. Everyone held

themselves carefully still. “Whether you are or not, I am not satisfied. And I want to know what happened today, to ensure it will never happen again. I expect answers, and nobody is going home until I get them.”

Glances were exchanged. Nobody was especially anxious to speak up, but they knew their leader well and knew that if he demanded answers, answers must be given. Cautiously Scrapper cleared his throat. “I, uh, dunno what it means, but I heard a lot of mechs shouting about their tables.”

“I heard that too,” Long Haul affirmed, quick to back up his brother. “Everybody was screamin’ about Shockwave – that he’d come to steal them.” Automatically everyone looked to Shockwave, standing on the far side of the room and looking conspicuously pristine compared to the scuffed and scraped soldiers around him. Obviously taken aback, he stared blankly at the Constructicons.

“No, I heard it was Shockwave sending enforcement agents to shut them down,” Dirge spoke up.

“Then why did I have to duck potshots from the enforcers?” Thundercracker pointed out acidly, still holding magnetic mesh against a seeping wound on his wing. “They shot at me, and they could see me just fine. They knew exactly who I was when they took aim.”

““Down with Shockwave, down with bribes,”” Mixmaster recited, and cringed when Shockwave swiveled a vicious glare his way. “I m-mean, that’s what I heard them sh-shouting. They wouldn’t stop, even when I was cracking their helms against the street. I dunno what they meant.”

“Maybe somethin’ to do with the fact that I found six lawkeepers shootin’ it out with a pack of civvies in a warehouse full of top-grade cubes.”

“No, those enforcers were covering civvie merchants, I saw it with my own optics.”

More and more Decepticons found something to say, adding to the heap of damning indictments piled at Shockwave’s pedes. Not only the Seekers but the Constructicons, mechs directly under Shockwave’s own purview, were speaking up, and Soundwave watched his optic get a little paler with every new comment. Megatron was looking back and forth to each speaker at first, but now his gaze settled on Shockwave and stayed there, hard and cold.

“My lord,” Shockwave said nervously, “I don’t know what those filthy ghetto dwellers were carrying on about, but I can hardly be held responsible for -”

Megatron held up a hand. “I will see you in my office, Shockwave. Dismissed.”

Stunned silent, everyone in the room heard the falter in Shockwave’s ventilations. No one had ever seen the premier dismissed in such a peremptory manner, and Shockwave himself didn’t quite seem to believe what he’d heard. Optic blanched in dismay, he shuffled a step forward, hesitated, then wisely resigned himself to obedience.

"O-of course, my lord. I will speak with you at your convenience." Simmering in humiliation, he bowed and retreated, his exit made all the more awkward for having to wade past several gaping Decepticons before he could reach the door.

"Somebody's in tro~ouble," Skywarp sang softly under the hum of his systems, snickering, and Soundwave glanced to Starscream. He was the only one in the room not watching Shockwave's disgraced retreat, but instead stared at Soundwave, mouth steadily falling open with astonishment. Impassively Soundwave returned the look, letting Starscream draw his own conclusions.

"As for the rest of you," Megatron was saying, "every Decepticon is now considered to be on active duty until informed otherwise, when I am sure this city is well and truly again under control. Report to your superiors for patrol assignments. Curfew will be lifted when I see fit. When it is, there will be a public flogging of those arrested in the riots, so the city may learn by example what happens to those who do not respect the laws of the empire. See that it's taken care of, Soundwave."

More than conscious that this was a task Megatron would have normally designated to Shockwave, Soundwave bowed in acceptance. Megatron grunted and turned on his heels, soldiers diving out of his path to the exit. Everyone vented in relief when the door slammed shut behind him, glad there had been no worse recrimination and doubly glad they were not Shockwave. Immediately their gossipy chatter filled the room, and Soundwave still had Starscream's full attention. Discreetly he tilted his head toward the nearest recovery room, and the wide-opticked Starscream trotted after him without demur.

"You," he started, the second the door had slid shut, "didn't do that. You... *couldn't* have done that. There is no way in this universe that you, Soundwave, could have possibly done *that*." Wildly he gestured at the walls, presumably to indicate the riot itself. "I mean- could you?"

There was something almost amusing about the fascinated stare Starscream had fixed upon him, as if he couldn't decide whether to be horrified or in awe. "Negative," Soundwave answered calmly. "Starscream, of course, correct. Soundwave, not given to such activities as triggering riots. Starscream knows this."

That much was true, and Starscream hesitated, looking awfully confused and just a little disappointed. "However, timing fortuitous. This datapad contains full details of every mistake Shockwave made, all factors that contributed to city's unrest. Evidence, extensive."

He held out the datapad. Yesterday the information would have been worthless; trying to show it to Megatron would have garnered nothing but a bored glance and a sharp reminder to respect the empire's laws. Now that Megatron was angry and ready to cast blame, it was nothing less than a small fortune in power. Starscream lifted it from Soundwave's hand as if holding precious jewels, almost caressing the edges of the precious datapad.

"Starscream should have no trouble preserving grounds for desired academy," Soundwave continued. "Now, return Jazz to my custody."

Starscream looked to be infatuated with his new prize, but he was still Starscream after all, and a cunning gleam stole into his optics. "Tell me why I shouldn't just double-cross you now, and take Jazz home tonight anyway."

"Desire to not suffer same fate as Shockwave," Soundwave answered promptly, without so much as a twitch. Starscream's optic ridges went up just a little, startled and obviously still unsure what Soundwave had done today. There was no reading Soundwave, though, and Starscream already had the greatest asset in his own hands. It only took him a few nanoklicks to consider the options, and then he shrugged in a careless way.

"I'll have to buy something pretty for Skywarp, I suppose. It's worth it. Shockwave's career has just taken a rather killing blow, and I should have no trouble digging my academy compound out of the entrails." He licked his lips with anticipation, tracing a fingertip up and down along the edge of the datapad's screen. "Do you want to do it together? There'll be more than enough for the both of us."

Soundwave shook his head. Shockwave's standing with Megatron had already been crippled well enough, and for him it was sufficient to know that his home was no longer in danger, and Jazz back inside it where he belonged. Let Starscream gobble up the glory, if he liked.

"Fine, suit yourself. I will tell Megatron I forgot how annoying that slave is and that, given the circumstances of our mutually difficult day, I am more than willing to return him to his rightful owner. I don't know how you're going to convince Megatron, but I'll leave that to you... along with the slave. Ta-ta, Soundwave, it was a pleasure doing business with you."

He fluttered his optics at Soundwave in a coquettish manner, then pranced out the door. At last. Soundwave watched him depart the medbay, but the front room was still crowded with Decepticons. The Autobot slave was intent on dressing Thundercracker's gashed wing, but when he saw Soundwave waiting in the doorway his hand shook and he stopped his task.

"Excuse me, sir, I need to get more clamps. Keep putting pressure on that line- I mean, *please* keep putting pressure there, and I will be right back." Thundercracker nodded impatiently, and First Aid bowed before slipping back to Soundwave. Hook's medbay was only one portion of the sprawling complex of the Constructicons, and he led Soundwave past examination rooms and equipment storage closets before turning into a small corridor. There was only one door and he opened it, quickly scooting aside so that Soundwave could enter. The room was crowded with storage crates, some of which had been shoved aside to make room for the gurney on which Jazz was lying. He was awake, but just barely, Soundwave could tell that much from the subdued glow in his visor. He rolled his head to the side when he heard the door opening, one arm flopping uselessly outward, and grinned at Soundwave.

"There's my prince," he drawled. "Come to rescue your helpless damsel in distress at last."

"Jazz, not helpless," Soundwave answered wryly, closing the distance between them, and Jazz's grin turned sly.

"Well that'll be our little secret, now won't it?" Still stiff with pain, he curled into Soundwave's arms when he was scooped up off the gurney, and linked his hands behind Soundwave's neck. "Aid, be a doll and show us a slightly more discreet exit out of this place, would you? Can't say I fancy wading through a crowd of Decepticons just now."

He didn't even look at the other Autobot as he spoke, gaze fixed on Soundwave, and didn't see the astonished look on the slave's face. First Aid was staring at them both, and he did not look especially pleased. "I - yes, Jazz. Of course, this way."

He backed away and turned to lead them, and Jazz rested his head against Soundwave's shoulder. "I'm so tired," he yawned. "Let's go home."

Soundwave couldn't agree more.

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"Oh here it comes- arg!" Jazz braced himself not-quite-soon-enough for the assault, as the door slid shut behind them. Instantly four of Soundwave's symbiotes descended on them both, chirping or babbling with relief according to model, nipping, biting, and punching wherever and as often as they could. Still in considerable pain, Jazz shrank into Soundwave's arms and tried to shield himself, to no avail. His muffled yelps did nothing to stop the overexcited attentions of his cassettes, and Soundwave had to shoo them off with chastising pulses of disapproval.

"Enough. Jazz's oversensitivity to physical contact, still severe. Traditional symbiote expression of relief must wait for his complete recovery."

"Or never," Jazz mumbled, though not hopefully.

"Also, your presence required elsewhere. Post-battle surveillance required, specifically more detailed casualty count, severely damaged properties, and evidence of looting. Megatron must have all information available. Reminder: non-Decepticons still under curfew. Unaccounted civilians outside must be reported."

"Aww..."

"Now," he said sternly, and the wings and shoulders of his tired symbiotes drooped. Ravage, who never forgot his proper duties, was already out in the city, but he knew how exhausted the others were. Mentally he comforted them with promises of joint massage and a long recharge soon enough, if they could just do enough to make sure Megatron would be satisfied. Disappointed, Laserbeak and Buzzsaw glided out the balcony doorway, and Rumble and Frenzy fired up their thrusters to follow.

"Rumble. Frenzy."

There it was, the telltale flinch they could not help but show whenever he used *that* tone of voice. Guiltily they ducked their heads and peeked over their shoulders. “Yeah, boss?”

“Remain inconspicuous.”

“Yes, boss!” They flashed relieved grins and launched into the air, dwindling into tiny points of light against the landscape. Soundwave turned away and carried Jazz through the now-peaceful apartment. In his personal chamber, he sat Jazz down on the edge of the berth and fetched a damp cloth from the washracks. Jazz was no longer a walking threat of electrocution, but Soundwave could still feel the burning heat from within his armor gaps. Gently he pressed the coolant-soaked cloth against what bare wires he could reach, trying to bring down his temperature.

“Jazz, disobeyed command not to corrupt symbiotes.”

Jazz’s visor had dimmed considerably, but at that an amused blue gleam flickered into existence. “I, of course, don’t have any idea what you’re talkin’ about, my love. I’ve just been lying in a medberth all day. But if I *were* to discuss that thing that I don’t know anything about, referring to the things those kids *didn’t* do, then I would say that it wasn’t so much about me but because they love you. And they would do anything for you.” Jazz touched him lightly in the center of his chest glass, almost as if to rest his hand there, but drew it away when he realized what he was doing. “But of course, I had nothing to do with that.”

“Lucky for Jazz,” Soundwave commented. “Otherwise, efforts to remain with Soundwave could be considered one point in my favor.”

Jazz stiffened, surprised, then quickly laughed. “I think this time it’s Jazz and Soundwave: one, rest of the world: zero.”

And wasn’t that an interesting observation, complete with any number of dangerous implications that Soundwave preferred not to contemplate right now. He filed those thoughts away for later and went back to his original point. “Fact remains, Jazz fought to escape Skywarp. Fought to return to my custody. Jazz, begged to return to me.”

“Ah, well. I would miss... Laserbeak.” Jazz flashed him a flippant grin. “And the rest of the kids. You know how bored they would be without me around. And speaking of boring, we both know Skywarp can’t give me half the challenge you can. That ain’t no game worth playin’.” He kept trying to look away and Soundwave moved to the side, putting himself back in Jazz’s field of vision.

“Jazz, speak honestly. Only this once, say the truth.”

Silence. Soundwave saw a shadow of fear cross that visor, and didn’t think Jazz would obey, but after a moment’s hesitation Jazz opened his mouth again. “The truth? You know I’m not so good with that, but after today I guess you do deserve it. The truth is, Soundwave, that I wanted to stay



with you. When Skywarp was dragging me away, all I could think about was getting back to your side. He had no right to interrupt what's happening between us."

He looked down, watching his fingers entwine themselves with Soundwave's, and summoned another wan smile. "After all, you know too much about me now. And I know too much about you. We're all... bound up together, like tangled suspension coils, and I can't be separated from you just yet."

The glow in his visor was soft and lush. Unconsciously he leaned forward, face moving closer to Soundwave's, then he hesitated and backed away. Whether it was because Soundwave's mask was in the way or just that he'd realized what he was about to do, Soundwave didn't know, but he had no intention of allowing Jazz to get away so easily. He retracted his mask and caught Jazz's chin in a firm grip, steering his face closer.

"Finish what you start," he commanded. Jazz trembled in his grasp, but there was no resistance. He was not capable of it. Helplessly Jazz tipped forward and pressed his lips to Soundwave's, soft dermal metal pressing against his own. His spark jumped at the contact, heat accelerating through his body, and then Jazz was deepening the kiss, glossa sliding into Soundwave's mouth. He was warm, and still tasted of charged ions, tiny tingles of energy sizzling pleasantly wherever he touched. Both of them pushed deeper, relishing the sensation, and Soundwave heard Jazz moan into the kiss. Soundwave kept silent but that didn't mean he wasn't affected, oh no, the surges of heat pulsing outward from his spark were becoming more frequent and more demanding by the second. Soundwave must have him, all of him, and without delay. He *must*.

The tiny tremors in Jazz's hands, as they clasped the edges of his armor, forced his reconsideration. Jazz was too exhausted and still suffering from internal injuries that made interface impossible, let alone enjoyable. Soundwave wanted his slave very much, but this was not the time, and to ignore that reality would be to throw away megacycles of careful patience. He let Jazz determine the length of the kiss, and by the time he finally pulled away, Soundwave could see he was panting a little. The look on his face was caught between aroused and terrified.

"I- I don't..."

"Hush, lie down. Your recharge, overdue and sorely needed."

Jazz looked ready to argue, perhaps convinced he needed to explain himself, but Soundwave silenced him with a finger over the mouth and nudged his slave into lying down. He did not lie down beside him but remained seated on the edge of the berth, rubbing gentle circles around Jazz's aching joints. It wasn't long before Jazz gave up and fell into recharge. He needed his rest so desperately; they all did, but Soundwave couldn't bring himself to sleep just yet. The day had been too full of frightening close calls to let him relax now, especially since Soundwave was all too aware that the danger wasn't over yet. Jazz was lying in his berth after all, in direct disobedience to Megatron's command, and that wasn't a detail his leader was going to miss. Even if Starscream had kept his word, how to convince Megatron that Jazz should still belong to Soundwave? He was mulling over how best to appeal to Megatron's charity, formulating arguments, when he was startled by an unexpected comm from Megatron himself.

*"Good work today," Megatron said briskly, without preliminaries. "Keep the slave."*

He signed off without waiting for an acknowledgement, and left Soundwave sitting stunned in the dark. Jazz's ventilations were slow and even, his recharge deep, and he didn't even stir when Soundwave stood up and left the room. His loft was still empty, but Soundwave did not need physical proximity to reach out to his symbiotes. Briefly he brushed minds with each of them, the mental equivalent of a quick hug, seeking comfort in the best way he knew how. He disguised it as a simple check on their status, but Ravage was not fooled. Soundwave felt his curiosity and worry, inquiring the reason for his master's new distress.

*"Megatron, allowing continued ownership of Jazz,"* Soundwave answered quietly, now outside on his balcony. Even in the darkness of curfew, he could see Decepticon Command looming in the distance. Ravage's surprise was evident, and so was his confusion. They all knew how angry Megatron had been.

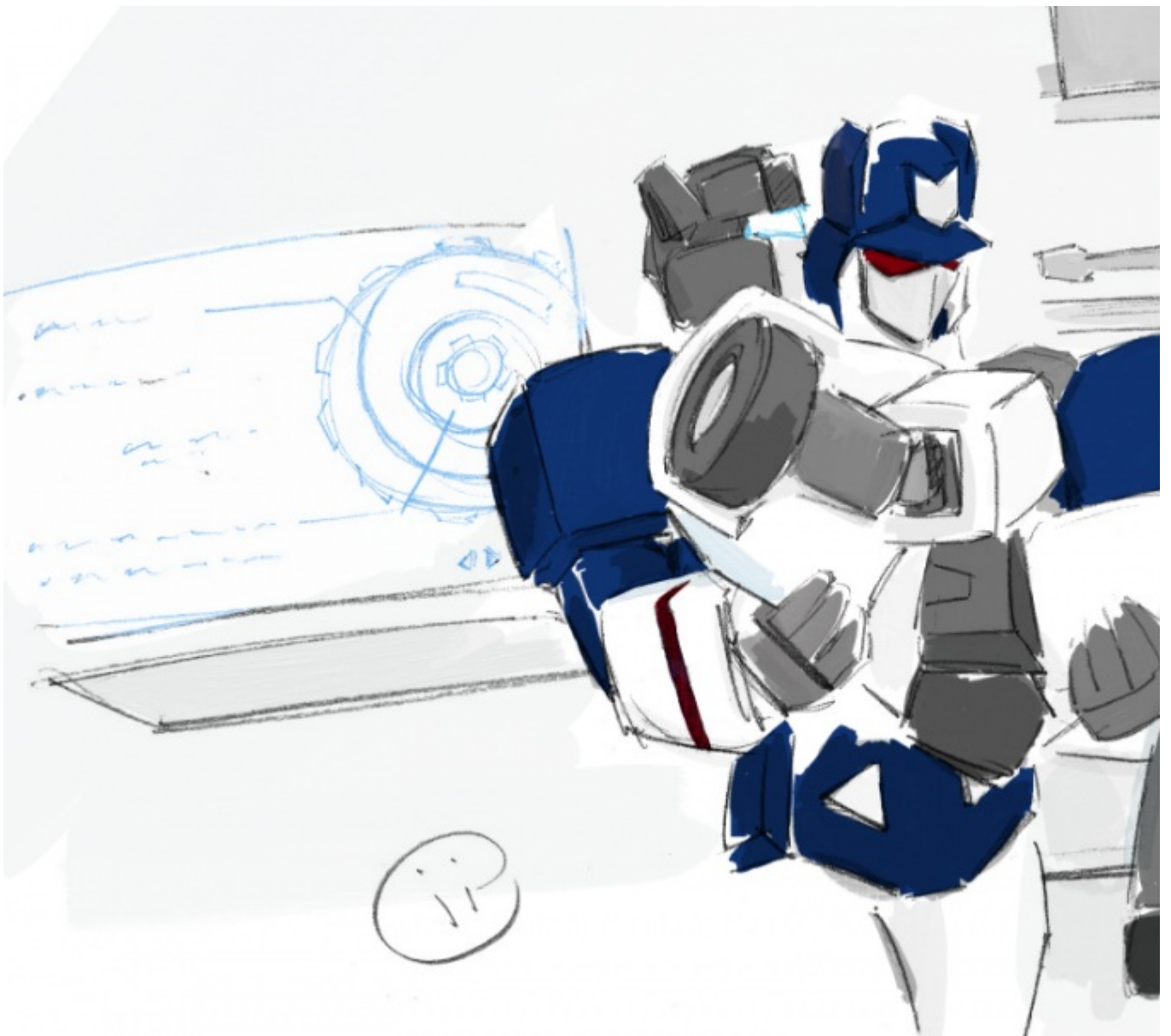
*Easy/unexpected,* ran the gist of Ravage's thoughts. *Why?*

*"Because now, he wants me to have this weakness."*

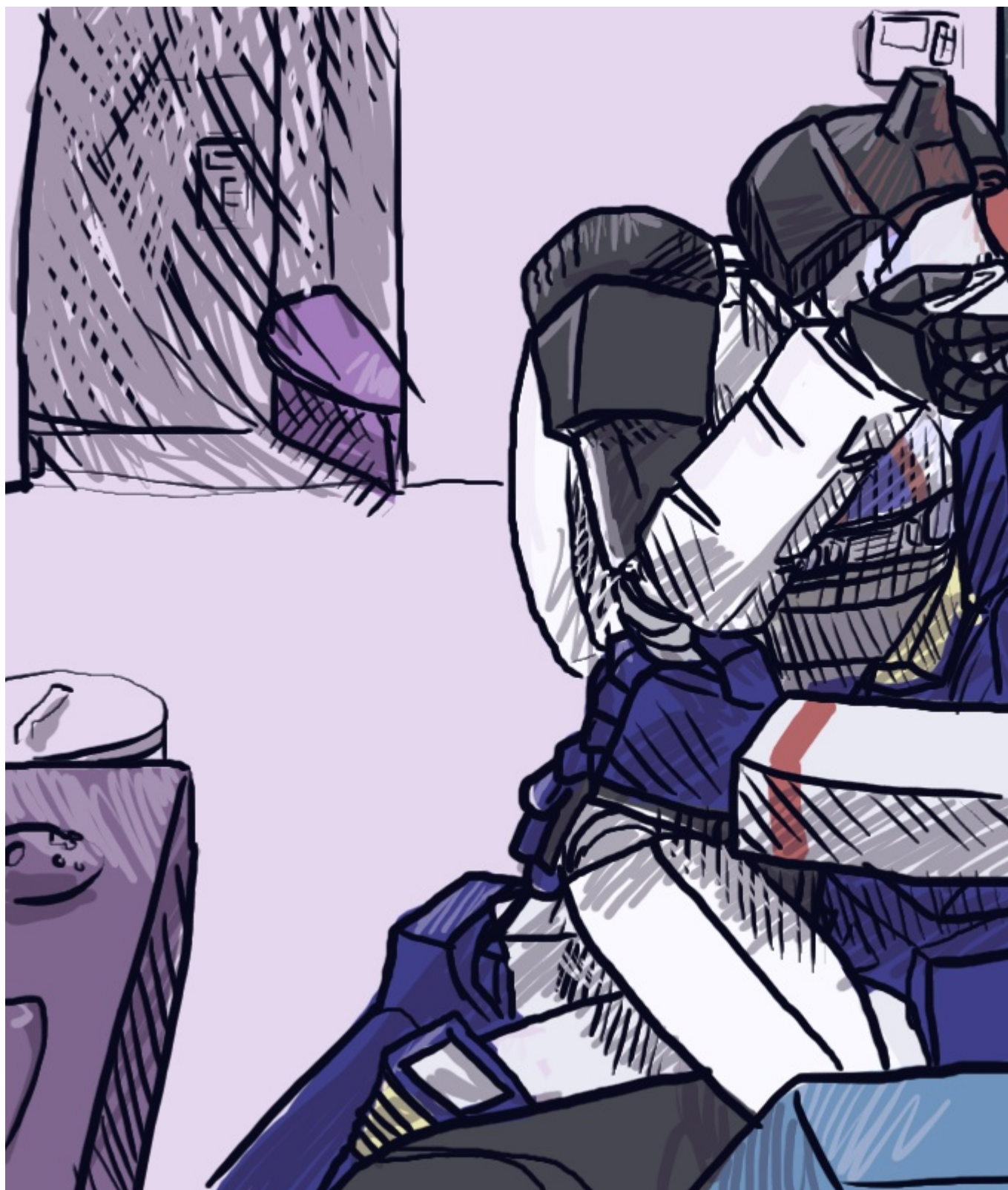
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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

*Leaving the Medbay,* by DrunkAngryRobot



*First Kiss*, by Swindleslog



## on loyalty

The repercussions of the market riots, as they came to be known, were many, and felt by mecha from every social layer on Cybertron. No one escaped completely unscathed, whether rich or poor, whether Decepticon or serf. It was the first major outbreak of violence in Megatron's reign, and the highest body count seen since the end of the war. Most of those deactivated frames were Iacon enforcers, those foolish enough to pick a firefight with Decepticons during the riots and consequently exterminated. Not all enforcers had been killed, but those who survived to see the next day were all simultaneously dismissed from their posts. Now they were let loose, jobless, amongst the very civilians they'd been regularly blackmailing, which in Soundwave's estimation was probably a harsher punishment than death. Their outcome would be interesting to watch.

Enforcement duties, meanwhile, had been transferred to the military. Megatron decreed all low-ranked Decepticon soldiers were now responsible for patrolling the city and suppressing crime, a decision shrewdly calculated to trim expenses and consolidate his power. No doubt it would achieve both goals, but now those Decepticons were pulling double duty for the same income, leaving Soundwave to wonder if they would eventually succumb to the same temptations the civilian enforcers did. That also would bear watching; their own commanders might not be up to the task.

Blitzwing and Astrotrain had kept their positions, mostly due to the fact that Megatron had no viable alternatives to appoint in their place, but their estate had been severely slashed for incompetence and gross negligence of duty. Officially, Megatron was assuming that the triplechangers hadn't watched their subordinates closely enough; unofficially, everyone knew they simply didn't care. They still didn't, but the shock of their punishment might prod them into a slightly more alert state. That, and the fact that they now reported directly to Megatron.

Their former supervisor had temporarily vanished. According to palace gossip, Shockwave had finally emerged from Megatron's office nearly a joor after being summoned inside that night, looking crushed in terms both emotional and physical. Probably, unlike Soundwave, he had not been fast enough to concede his mistakes. Starscream had no doubt done a thorough job of furnishing Megatron with the sordid details of Shockwave's actions, and Megatron would have been furious.

Never mind that Shockwave had only been trying to preserve the wealth of the empire, for Megatron's sake. Never mind that, until now, Megatron had given unquestioning support to all of Shockwave's policies. Now that the effects had been felt, everything was Shockwave's fault.

Soundwave watched him take the fall without pity, knowing that he himself had only narrowly escaped the same fate. Life in Megatron's top command was not as easy as most footsoldiers assumed.

Technically, the only official result of Megatron's 'discussion' with Shockwave was that he'd been relieved of his command over Law Enforcement. But it was rumored (and his symbiotes were absolutely gleeful over the vast amount of gossip available for eavesdropping) that Megatron had 'suggested' to Shockwave that he take a small leave from work. Exactly how small that leave would be was yet to be determined, but in the end it might not matter. Whenever he returned, Shockwave would find the culture of Decepticon command very different. His influence over the new government, always reliant on Megatron's tacit support, evaporated practically overnight. Mecha made plans without him, didn't bother seeking approval for projects, skipped meetings or cancelled them altogether. Permit application lines vanished, because no one was bothering with permits.

Starscream, who'd been sighted on several occasions skipping and humming in the halls, laid official claim to the grounds for his future academy. He was already nagging the Constructicons to

patch the buildings into the power grid, bypassing Shockwave's supervision entirely. There was no longer anyone to stop him. Most importantly of all, at least from Soundwave's perspective, there was no more talk of his home being slated for demolition.

"I didn't even know about that one," Jazz remarked, interrupting Soundwave's flow of updates for the first time. His attention was outwardly focused on his task, massaging a medical salve into Soundwave's scrapes and dents, but Soundwave knew he'd been paying fierce attention to every word. They hadn't been taking their walk, due to the current state of the city, and his slave was starved for news. He looked slightly affronted that there'd been another threat he missed completely.

"Soundwave, disinclined to share upsetting news until it became urgent matter. Such news, very distressing to all inhabitants in this home, and liable to induce panic. Danger over now, and irrelevant."

"As irrelevant as Shockwave himself," Jazz said cheerfully. "Hope he rusts when he cries himself to sleep at night. I... don't suppose Megatron took away Chromia as part of his punishment."

"Negative."

Jazz sighed, and then shrugged. "It was a hope, but a small one. Megatron would have known that wasn't the best way to hurt him. Still, it's a good day's work. I am not *unhappy* with the results. I am sorry that it got so messy, though." Gingerly he dabbed cold salve onto a nasty scrape. "You took some hard hits out there."

"Danger, negligible. Civilian uprising, unfocused and amateur compared to Autobot resistance."

"Well I thank you for the compliment," Jazz said graciously, then tilted his head and narrowed his gaze a little. "But this looks really painful. How did any of those amateurs manage to get such a hard grip?"

Delicately he touched one of the damaged cables in Soundwave's neck, and Soundwave tried not to flinch. The damage was hardly lethal, but some very vulnerable wires had been nearly crushed and they were still tender. "This, result of Megatron's anger."

"Oh," Jazz said quietly, his voice noticeably subdued. "Ouch. He really got you good, didn't he? He was so mad; I couldn't believe it when he knocked you to the floor in front of everyone." He traced his fingertip down the neck cable and then abruptly scooted backward on the berth, putting more distance between them.

"How can you serve him?"

The blunt question surprised Soundwave, who hadn't been asked such a thing in hundreds of vorns. "Megatron, my leader."

“He’s a cruel leader who tramples on his subordinates, blames them for his mistakes, and beats them when things don’t go his way,” Jazz argued. “He’s almost worse to his own soldiers than he is to the enemy. I *have* to kneel to Megatron, because I am a slave and don’t get a say in the matter. Why do you?”

“Soundwave, pledged loyalty to Megatron many centuries ago. His actions now, irrelevant. For this model, loyalty permanent.” Soundwave pressed a hand against his chest compartment, conscious of the sleeping twins inside. “All carrier models, hardcoded for loyalty. Such loyalty required to protect symbiotes, fundamental to way of life. This loyalty applied to Lord Megatron as matter of course.”

“Even if he does *this* to you?”

“Megatron has expectations of my performance. Soundwave, failed those expectations. Deserved punishment.”

“Evidently you didn’t feel like you deserved it that much,” Jazz retorted. “Since you jumped through all manner of ethically questionable hoops to get me back.”

Soundwave avoided that uncomfortable train of thought with some determination, keeping his attention firmly on the current subject. “Betrayal of leader, impossible for my kind. Jazz, not able to understand such loyalty?”

“Not for someone like that.” Jazz hugged his knees to his chest, looking wistful. “If you were going to sell your soul on a first-come, lifetime guarantee basis, I wish the Autobots had gotten to you first. Things would have been... different.”

“Autobots, nonexistent before rise of Megatron’s revolution,” Soundwave pointed out. “Revolution, largely dependent on my reconnaissance and surveillance. Your wish, impossible.”

“Just like all the others.”

Soundwave watched Jazz’s gaze cloud over with sadness, and picked up the salve. “Jazz, your task unfinished. Attend to injuries.”

“Yes, master.” Jazz shuffled back into his place by Soundwave’s elbow. He wasn’t looking up, and didn’t see it when Soundwave retracted his mask or leaned in close. His slave tensed, startled, at the unexpected kiss, but he didn’t push away and he even opened his lips a little for greater access. His visor was glowing a richer blue when Soundwave pulled away, almost as if he were blushing, if Soundwave could ever believe such a thing.

“What was that for?”

“Reminder.”

“Of what? That I had a moment of weakness, and now you think you can just drop in for a kiss whenever you want?”

“Affirmative. Also, that Jazz not completely unhappy here. Your admission: you fought to return to me when taken away.”

“I said that, huh?” A wry grin flitted across Jazz’s face. “I must have really been out of it.”

“Jazz, prefers ownership by Soundwave.”

“You know that’s not exactly right.”

“Acknowledged.” Soundwave helped himself to another kiss, this one deeper and more insistent. Jazz accepted the kiss, doing his best to keep up with Soundwave’s sudden urgency. At first he responded, pressing up against Soundwave’s lips, humming deep in his throat, but when Soundwave pushed harder he hesitated and tried to pull away. Soundwave sensed the change and was about to release Jazz when an overly loud hack/cough, distinctly feline in nature, ended things anyway. Jazz shoved himself away from Soundwave and nearly off the berth, barely managing to salvage his balance just in time.

“Ravaaage!” In the doorway, Rumble and Frenzy’s expressions turned from avid delight to exasperation, and they directed twin glares at their older brother. “You ruined it!”

“The one time you actually do make a noise –“

“Why do you hafta be such a killjoy?”

Unrepentant, Ravage ignored their complaints and shot Soundwave a disgusted scowl, plainly unhappy with what he’d just witnessed. “How long were you two standing there?” Jazz asked accusingly, and the twins’ expressions switched back to smirks.

“Long enough, loverboy. Don’t stop on our account, and don’t stop on Ravage’s account either. He doesn’t get to decide these things for the whole team.”

Jazz caught Soundwave’s gaze and huffed. “I don’t even want to know if you knew they were there. I’m surrounded by voyeurs on all sides in this house.”

“Nature of symbiotic relationship – “



“Never mind. My hands are gunky with your medicine anyway; I’m gonna go rinse off in the racks. Paparazzi need not follow.” He swiveled off the berth and picked his way through the casseticons, taking care to exchange a nasty glare with Ravage for posterity’s sake.

“Ravage, you really are such a slagger,” Rumble grumped. “The boss was totally getting some, and it sure took long enough. Why do you always have to spoil everything?”

“Patience advised,” Soundwave interceded, before Ravage could growl and snap at his glowering brother. “Jazz, at delicate stage in his training. Torn between affection for new master, and loyalty to former faction. Excessive fear or discomfort could result in regression.” He held out his hands in invitation, and Rumble and Frenzy obligingly threw themselves onto his lap.

“But we’re bored with your stupid patience,” Frenzy whined. “You’ve been holding back ever since the night you brought him home, even though you didn’t have to, and we’re tired of waiting. What about us? Don’t you care about your symbiotes? It’s time for more, already.”

“When Jazz ready, Jazz will come to me,” Soundwave assured them. Reflexively he glanced at the windowsill nearest the berth. The folded red foil pattern was still sitting there, where it had been since the day Jazz placed it there out of harm’s way. “Jazz, unable to resist growing feelings for me.”

“Well I wish he’d hurry up about it.”

“This, not your first concern. Today’s surveillance report, your first concern. Prepare for uplink now.” They scrambled up onto his shoulders when he stood, grumbling all the while, and he moved toward the doorway. Ravage, though, wasn’t quite finished. He intercepted Soundwave with a hard push against the legs, tail gliding over the armor, his intent clear in his body language. Soundwave caught a drift of his quiet anxiety, and realized that Ravage had been holding onto something for a while that he was now determined to share. He was surprised, but he did not hesitate.

“Rumble, Frenzy, symbiotic upload delayed. Ravage requires preference in order.”

“Aw!”

“Ravage gets *everything*.”

Ravage snarled in warning, and the twins took the hint. “Fine, fine, we’ll wait.”

“We’ll make Jazz scrub us down.”

“Maybe start a soap fight.”

“Either way, we’ll have fun without you.” They stuck their respective glossas out at their brother, then slithered off Soundwave’s frame and scampered from the room. Seconds later Soundwave could hear Jazz’s shouts of dismay as the twins invaded his shower. At least the three of them should keep each other adequately entertained for a while. Soundwave followed Ravage into his office and locked the door behind him, ensuring solitude and quiet. Now that Ravage wasn’t trying to keep it under wraps, his distress was tugging more urgently at Soundwave. A wordless question from him prompted Ravage to send him three databursts, almost simultaneously: the first a timestamp indicating the day of the riots, the second a coordinates stamp for the head Law Enforcement Office, and the third, strangely enough, an image of the Autobot Bumblebee.

“Autobot, reason for concern?” Soundwave queried. “Autobot witnessed your infiltration?”

Ravage answered in the affirmative, without hesitation. But that was not the reason for his concern, Soundwave could feel easily enough. Ravage pinged the request for entry, indicating the full memory file would serve as better explanation. Obliging Soundwave opened his chest, and Ravage transformed and docked.

*The space below was silent. Ravage slithered easily through the ceiling’s crawlspace, sacrificing caution for speed and not in the least concerned about doing so. The department was empty; every lawkeeper had been deployed to curb the growing violence in the city. Things were rapidly escalating out of control, from the look of his datastreams, but right now Ravage didn’t care about anything except his mission. His master had been unfairly punished and humiliated today, and Ravage would see it undone before the day was through. Fluidly he eased through the ventilation gap along the edge of the ceiling, landed soundlessly on the surface of Astrotrain’s desk, turned around, and found himself looking straight into Bumblebee’s shocked blue optics.*

*Equally taken aback, the two stared at one another. Ravage wasn’t capable of speaking a word, and Bumblebee wouldn’t have been capable of hearing it. In the old days, during the war, Ravage would have simply attacked, but now to leave so much as a mark on the slave would give away his presence in the office. Of all the obstacles flung at Soundwave and his team today, a helpless slave was suddenly the most troublesome of them all.*

*A frustrated growl was just starting to vibrate in Ravage’s throat when Bumblebee stood up unexpectedly. Not for a second did he take his gaze off Ravage, but his fingers tapped in rapid precision against the desk’s comm unit, switching off the open channel. Then he booted up the main terminal, accessing it on what was obviously his master’s password, and backed away. Silently as Ravage himself, the slave crossed the room and slipped out the doors, leaving them fractionally ajar. The slant of his shadow made it clear enough that he was taking up a lookout position.*

*The chrono was ticking, and Ravage didn’t have much time. He put aside his surprise and concentrated on ruthlessly hacking Astrotrain’s terminal, locating and copying the files. Open access through the owner’s password helped speed things along. When he was done, he hid any trace of his intrusion, disengaged his connection, and sprang back up into the ceiling without so much as looking back. But he did hear, just as his tail vanished through the gap, the scratchy sounds of Bumblebee clearing his throat before Blitzwing burst through the door and stomped inside.*

Ravage couldn't afford to worry then; too much had been at stake, and they'd all barely escaped that day intact. But now, Soundwave could feel well enough, the more he thought about it the more it bothered him. It bothered Soundwave a little too. He requested file replay, watching the scene again with careful scrutiny.

Bumblebee was a bot who shared a long history of mutual loathing with Ravage, the two of them being counterparts in both espionage and reconnaissance. If there was any Autobot least inclined to do him any favors, that was the one. Nor was there any way Bumblebee could have known why he'd come, let alone that he was coming at all, going by the shocked look on his face when Ravage dropped in so unexpectedly. But after that one hiccup of surprise, he'd moved seamlessly into a support role anyway. No questions asked, no protest made. He'd simply moved aside and let Ravage work. As an asset to Ravage's mission, he'd been perfect, and that was exactly the problem.

Ravage was still in his chest, content to rest for a little while. Alone in his quiet office, Soundwave shuttered his optics and started pulling more from his own memories. He considered Jazz, and his impressive flexibility on that day. Like Bumblebee, there was no way he could have known what was coming, yet he'd reacted with a clever counterstrategy and no hesitation. Or *did* he know? Did they both?

Soundwave's thoughts went deeper. They went back to the source of all the trouble, the mangled spy camera found where it was never supposed to be. It was his, but it was not from his current stock, since none were missing from inventory. When Starscream crushed it he'd destroyed any chance of tracing its ID code. It could have been stolen at any time, if the thief was willing to wait patiently enough. And on that count, there was no shortage of suspects. Soundwave considered their various motives, means, and outcomes.

Starscream was still the most likely candidate, in his view. He was the clear victor at the end of the day, politically speaking, and it would have been easiest for him to plant a stolen camera in his own home. It was also a scheme that, as his own symbiotes had rightfully pointed out, was exactly the sort of thing Starscream would do. But why now, after all this time? When Soundwave considered timing, his thoughts moved to Shockwave, who had a number of fairly recent reasons to hate Soundwave. He'd been so smug, that day in Headquarters. Yet Soundwave could see no way for him to get a stolen camera inside the Seekers' grounds, let alone into Starscream's personal chambers.

And then there was Jazz. He'd ended the day just as he began it, a slave, but in the meantime he'd orchestrated a riot that briefly crippled the Decepticon Empire and brought the hated Shockwave to his knees. He wasn't even trying to hide how pleased he was with the outcome. There was no way that Soundwave could see for him to plant that camera inside Starscream's chambers... but that didn't mean another Autobot didn't. Highly unlikely, Soundwave allowed, but not exactly impossible either.

This pattern was starting to feel familiar. Soundwave accessed older memory files, running simple cross references between them. Jazz – either accidentally or not – had convinced the Combaticons to raid Earth and steal Hound. He made a point of establishing daily alibis through his antics on the home monitoring system, just before that Autobot graffiti appeared on Megatron's statue. That crime

of vandalism had yet to be solved. And now there was the crisis with the camera. In all three cases Soundwave couldn't quite find solid proof... but he couldn't quite prove Jazz was innocent either. Soundwave was not foolish enough to think this a coincidence. Jazz was playing some kind of game; of that much Soundwave was sure. He just couldn't fathom what it was.

So what was there to be done about it? Soundwave could watch Jazz more closely, and he could separate him from the other Autobots more carefully. But how could he keep Jazz separate from himself? Alone now, Soundwave couldn't delay admitting what he'd done anymore. Somehow, he'd let himself be convinced by his own slave to look the other way while Jazz inflicted deliberate sabotage on the peace of the empire – using members of his own team to do it, no less. Rumble and Frenzy weren't troubled by what they'd done; Soundwave knew that they didn't think of it as anything more than an elaborate prank. They could feel smug and clever about it, but Soundwave trembled to think what Megatron would do to them all if he knew. What Soundwave had allowed – tacitly supported, even – was nothing less than treason.

How had it come to this? That Soundwave, Megatron's most faithful soldier, could commit such betrayal? Soundwave was a host carrier model. He was *loyal*, before all else. No one in the Decepticon ranks had thought to question that loyalty for hundreds of vorns. But something had changed when he brought Jazz into his home, somehow it became a better idea to hide certain truths from Megatron and not always completely answer his questions. That he hadn't lied was a fine line between semantics. Soundwave was aghast at all that he'd done, but he was also helplessly aware that each time, this last time especially, he would have done nothing different. The stakes were too high to consider anything else. Maybe, Soundwave thought, that was exactly how Jazz wanted it.

He was beginning to wonder which of them would undo the other first.

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The line of prisoners seemed to last forever. It wound back and forth, folded up against itself, filling half the city square before it ended at the edge of the platform. Every other breem, a soldier uncuffed the next criminal from the long chain and pushed him up the steps. Half a hundred mecha had been chained to the post on the platform by now, tried to hold back their screams under the acid whip, and half a hundred had all failed. What space in the square wasn't filled by waiting prisoners was taken up by anyone else that could squeeze their way in, watching the unending spectacle in grim silence. Soundwave could not help but notice the quiet, which allowed each scream to carry so much further. When he compared this scene to public punishments in the past, it was visibly more subdued than the cheerful audiences who'd come before. No doubt this was due to the high proportion of criminals to watchers, and perhaps also to the certainty that most of the watchers were simply lucky to not also be in chains.

One way or another, everyone was here because of the short Autobot at his elbow, humming softly under the whirr of his systems. Soundwave had not been quite sure what to expect, when he brought Jazz along with him today, but his slave watched Blitzwing crack his whip against the backs of prisoners without so much as a twitch.

“Jazz, feels no concern for victims?” Soundwave asked at last, while the next prisoner was dragged

to the whipping post. “Or responsibility?”

“I told you before, Soundwave, I am not a nice Autobot. I am the one who does the dirty work. If I stopped to worry about every clueless bystander before I work my magic, I’d get no tricks done at all. Besides, last time I counted, I don’t owe those neutrals anything but several dents and a broken arm.”

He flashed a humorless smile and wiggled the fingers of his right hand in demonstration, then turned his attention back to the platform. It was a convincing argument, but Soundwave hadn’t forgotten the day Shockwave’s enforcers raided the market on a permit inspection. Jazz had been so upset.

“Suspicion,” he remarked, “Jazz lying at least partially.”

His slave didn’t try to argue, just grinned and shrugged. “And if I am, does it concern you?”

“Experience shows every lie of yours concerns me.”

*That* got Jazz’s attention, and he darted a quick appraising look at Soundwave that was returned in even measure. Neither had a chance to say anything else before a surprised shout went up from the crowd, and Soundwave looked up. Megatron had made his appearance, his unmistakable massive frame towering over anyone else close by. From the sounds of things, several of the waiting prisoners were babbling pleas for forgiveness and clemency, which Megatron seemed not to hear as he rounded the platform. Blitzwing paused in his task to bow, then hesitated, glancing from the mech that begged for Megatron’s mercy back to Megatron himself. Impatiently Megatron nodded for him to continue. Begging turned back to screams, and Megatron turned from the platform. Soundwave had hoped he would not turn his attention to them, but Megatron was coming straight towards them in long strides.

“Reminder,” he said quietly, “Jazz promised good behavior for Megatron.”

“I remember,” Jazz muttered tersely, and then Megatron was there. Soundwave bowed, checking in the corner of his vision to make sure Jazz did too.

“Lord Megatron.”

“Soundwave,” Megatron greeted, with an acknowledging nod. “It all seems to be going smoothly enough; good work today. I know you didn’t have much time to organize it.”

“Your satisfaction, appreciated.”

“What of the crowd? They giving you any trouble?”

“Outward resistance, nonexistent.”

An optic ridge went up at his choice of words. “And resistance not so outward?”

“Reports from symbiotes indicate strong resentment,” Soundwave answered cautiously. It wasn’t an answer he wanted to give, but Megatron had asked and it was the truth. “Large number of prisoners ensures that consequences felt directly by almost every mech in city. Popular sympathy, strong. General feeling: this punishment severe and unjust.”

He braced himself, but Megatron just looked out calmly over the crowd. “Is that so? They don’t know their leader well enough, then. But they’ll learn.” He grinned at Soundwave, in an ominous sort of way. “All my followers do. Isn’t that right, Soundwave?”

Soundwave held himself perfectly still when Megatron lifted a hand to his neck, thumb absently brushing over the bruised cables. It hurt, but he managed not to flinch or show pain. He was not surprised by Megatron’s casual display of dominance, but he *was* surprised when a low growl reverberated from within Jazz’s chest. The engine inside rumbled protectively, and getting louder with every passing second that Megatron’s fingertips lingered on Soundwave. Megatron shot Jazz a startled look, but Soundwave could tell no one was more surprised than Jazz himself. Discomfited, he promptly smothered the sound, but it was too late.

“Did you have something to say, Autobot?”

“No,” Jazz answered after a second’s hesitation, glancing swiftly at Soundwave. “... my lord.”

“How unusual.” The light in Megatron’s optics kindled with interest and he took Jazz’s chin in his hand, forcing his head to tip one way and then the other. Jazz’s visor flashed with hatred, but he kept silent. “I’m impressed, Soundwave, you really are making progress with this one. Good work.”

Without warning he leaned a little closer to Soundwave, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “I’ll just *borrow* him for a minute.”

Before Soundwave even had time to process the words, Megatron pivoted and marched right back in the direction from which he’d come, dragging Jazz alongside him. He heard Jazz squeak with surprise just once, before he clamped his mouth shut and scrambled to keep up with Megatron’s long strides. Shocked, Soundwave stayed right where he was and tried to tamp down his panicking carrier protocols. Megatron pounded up the steps onto the platform, causing a surprised Blitzwing to back hastily out of the way, and threw Jazz down onto the flooring. The entire city square went from mostly-quiet to dead silent in an instant, every pair of optics locked on Megatron and the slave at his pedes.

“My Cybertronians,” he began, his powerful voice rolling over the crowd without effort. Instantly

Soundwave was reminded of the early days of the revolution, how Megatron could whip a crowd into a frenzy with nothing but words. He was the master of his audience and always had been. “It has come to my attention that this punishment does not please you,” he was saying. “That you think it ‘unjust’ and ‘cruel’. I was surprised to hear this, because I *had* thought I was being extraordinarily lenient. You are, after all, the mecha who rioted and ransacked my city, flouted my authority, and attacked my soldiers.”

He paused to look directly at the prisoners nearest the platform, all of whom squirmed and dropped their optics. After letting the uncomfortable silence drag on for a few nanokliks, Megatron spoke again. “There was another group of mecha, once, who fought my soldiers. Claimed I was not fit to rule. Called me ‘tyrant’ and ‘evil’.” Unhurriedly he began to circle Jazz, who was still exactly where he’d been thrown and wasn’t daring to move a strut. “Do you know what happened to them?”

Megatron met Jazz’s wary gaze, snapped his fingers, and pointed expectantly at the floor. Another dreadful silence ensued, while the two of them looked at one another, and Soundwave froze all ventilations. He knew what Megatron wanted, and he knew perfectly well that Jazz did too, but he could not be sure Jazz would comply. Most of Iacon was watching, and if there was ever a time for Jazz to mock Megatron’s authority this would be it. It would get him killed, but when did that ever stop Jazz? Unnoticed, his hands tightened into painful fists.

Jazz finally moved, stiffly, in a way that had nothing to do with Megatron’s rough handling. Visor blazing with hatred, he rearranged himself on his knees and bowed, putting his face to the floor. Megatron smiled, pleased, and nudged his pede under Jazz’s chin to force optical contact.

“What are you, Jazz?”

“I am a slave,” Jazz muttered, too low for Megatron’s liking. He pushed up a little harder under Jazz’s chin.

“So they can *hear* you.”

“I am,” Jazz repeated, loud and clear, “a slave.”

“And why are you a slave?”

“I am being punished for the crime of standing in your way.”

“Very good.” Megatron kicked Jazz aside and turned to the crowd again, basking in their terrified awe. “Now then, I say your punishment is lenient. Do you agree?”

“Yes!” the Iaconians hurried to shout, falling over themselves in their eagerness to agree. “Praise Lord Megatron!”

“Long live the emperor!”

“Glory to Decepticons!”

“All hail Lord Megatron!”

Satisfied, Megatron nodded, and waved a dismissive hand in Blitzwing’s direction. “Carry on,” he ordered, and hauled Jazz back to his pedes before dismounting the platform. Within a few nanokliks he was back at Soundwave’s side.

“There,” he remarked, looking quite pleased with himself. “I think that did the trick. As you were.” He pushed Jazz back at Soundwave and kept moving, exhibiting total indifference to the cries of praise still falling all around him. His long strides carried him out of the square and out of sight, leaving the neutrals to their flogging. Soundwave could feel Jazz trembling, and automatically moved to hold him close to his chest.

“*Niet*,” Jazz said quickly, and pushed himself back. “*No, please. Everybody’s still looking.*”

It was true, as soon as Megatron disappeared most of the crowd’s attention had turned back to Jazz. He was still shaking a little, his voice included, but he clenched his denta and forced himself to stand tall. “*Let me have this much.*”

He had kept his word; he’d been nothing but deferential to Megatron. And he’d done it for Soundwave’s sake. Graciously Soundwave nodded his understanding, and they both turned back to the platform as if nothing had ever happened.

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The hax set had seen more attention in the last four cycles than they’d been able to give it in a deca-orn. Even so, they were still no closer to ending the game. Few pieces had been captured, and Soundwave and Jazz were both so keen to execute tight, careful strategies that neither could even corner the other. Their armies had chased one another up, down, and around the set three times over by now, to no effect. It truly was the longest single game of hax that Soundwave had ever played. Jazz picked up a piece, idly twirling it between his fingers, then put it back again, either because he’d changed his mind or he just wanted to mislead Soundwave on the course of his plans. Soundwave had learned the hard way that either was equally likely.

“So can we finally go out today? Don’t get me wrong, I do love this game, but it does involve a lot of sitting still.” He fidgeted restlessly in his seat and smiled hopefully at Soundwave. “Surely by now it would be okay to leave the loft. Right?”



The reason the hax set had been getting so much attention these past four cycles was because Soundwave had put a temporary hold on their walks. The city was still so raw, after the riots, scarred and simmering with resentment. Soundwave was reluctant to walk alone in certain districts, let alone take his slave on a frivolous walk. However, now that the public flogging had been executed and the prisoners discharged, the atmosphere was improving. The Cybertronians were used to living in the gaps between violence, and swift to recover. Reports from his symbiotes the previous cycle indicated large patches of the market were back in business, cheerfully so even, now that word of Shockwave's fall from grace had spread.

"Condition of city, now found satisfactory," Soundwave answered. "Civilian activity, re-established. Public deference to Decepticons, sufficient to allow recreational walk again."

"Don't worry, master." Jazz reached across the table and squeezed Soundwave's hand. "If any of them give you trouble... I'll just explain that you're with me."

Soundwave's first instinct was to roll his optics. Instead, he wryly answered, "Offer of protection, appreciated."

Jazz, naturally, hadn't been expecting him to go along with his joke, and he lit up with a smile both surprised and pleased. It was the kind of smile that made Soundwave's spark spin a little faster, and want to move Jazz's hand to somewhere else on his body, but that would have to wait. An incoming alert had just signaled a comm from Megatron.

"Pause in game, necessary. Lord Megatron waits." He ignored the face that Jazz made, and retreated into his office to accept the comm on his console.

"Soundwave!"

"Lord Megatr-"

"The workers finally finished cleaning and taking restock in the reserves. It's worse than I thought. I've just sent you the file, and I want you to calculate how much longer our stored energon will last under current consumption rates."

Soundwave viewed the size of the new file with some apprehension. "Calculate fuel consumption? This task -" *Normally Shockwave's*, he nearly said, but didn't just in time. If Megatron did not want to assign the problem to Shockwave, then it was his prerogative to do so. It was Soundwave's duty to accept it without complaint, not ask questions.

"... this task, accepted. Results will be delivered in tomorrow's cycle."

"No, you will have the results ready in one joor. I'm calling a meeting to address the shortage and I want your numbers at hand. This is not a problem that can wait."

Inwardly Soundwave wilted, but his only reaction was to bow. “Understood, Lord Megatron. Will be present, with report, in one joor.”

“Good. Dismissed.” The screen flickered to black, and Soundwave cycled a weary vent. Fuel consumption for an entire government - and for an entire city - was not something he’d ever calculated before, and he was not familiar with the formulas Shockwave had always used. This was going to take every available klik of the next joor, and there was no time to spare. He returned to the common room.

“Jazz, new circumstances require my presence in Headquarters immediately. Extensive preparation required for new meeting.”

Jazz’s easy smile vanished from his face, his dismay obvious. “But what about our walk? It’s been cycles, and you promised! You said we could!”

“Apology offered; walk can be taken tomorrow. Megatron must take priority.”

“So what else is new?” Jazz asked bitterly. A scowl flashed across his visor, which was training itself on the two little symbiotes on his couch. “Actually - can Rumble and Frenzy take me out?”

“Gaming here,” Rumble said flatly, not taking his optics off the screen.

“Oh, please? Pleeese?” Jazz danced lightly to the couch and bent over its backside, fixing both twins with a desperate smile. “Have some pity, I haven’t been outside this building in three cycles. You guys get to go out every day!”

“Which is exactly why we’re *here* now, catching up on the important things in life, like *Assassin’s Creed*.”

Jazz’s engine whined piteously, not a normal sound, and Soundwave recalled Hook’s warning. Jazz was a vehicle model, he said, they required frequent mobility or would suffer emotional distress.

“Rumble, Frenzy, order given: escort Jazz on walk.”

“What! But boss, we’re in the middle of -”

“Hey, Frenz.” Rumble poked his brother in a mid-torso seam. “Let’s just put it on pause. Maybe taking Jazz on a walk through downtown will be fun.”

Something passed between them, and Frenzy’s optics took on an enterprising gleam. “Oh yeah - *fun*. Okay Jazz, we’ll take you.”

Alarms were already blaring in Soundwave's mind, and he plucked both twins off the couch to face him directly. "Rumble, Frenzy, you will remain on regularly preferred route through main commercial district. You will not take Jazz into any suspicious areas. You will not engage in any activity other than taking walk. You will not allow any interaction between Jazz and any Decepticon. Or Autobot." He thought about it and added, "Or anyone."

"Can we do *anything*?"

"Walk."

The shoulders of all three mechs, Rumble, Frenzy, and Jazz, slumped. "Well gee, how could this not be fun?"

"Arguments, futile and unnecessary." Anxiously he checked his own chronometer. "My departure, overdue."

He turned towards the balcony doors, but paused by Jazz and took his chin in hand. When he was quite sure he had Jazz's full attention, he said just one word.

"Behave."

Knowing full well the history that prompted Soundwave to say it, Jazz smiled guiltily and crossed his spark. It would have to be enough; Soundwave had no more time to delay. He gifted Jazz with a final warning look, made for the balcony, and fired up his thrusters. Already he could hear Frenzy asking Jazz if he would do a backflip off the market square wall.

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"It's worse than we had thought," Megatron started, without preamble. "When the riots hit the city, security forces at our energon storage reserves were overwhelmed. The mobs used confusion and their temporary strength in numbers to overrun some of the facilities. Thirty-six out of our seventy-five reserves were attacked. A dozen of them got cleaned out. The others lost anywhere from ten to seventy percent, depending on quickly our infantry could get there for backup. Soundwave has calculated that, at our usual rate of consumption, we will have exhausted our reserves in just over two deca-orns."

The other Decepticons in the room received the news in grim silence. Everyone had known there'd been some fuel theft, but thanks the mess left behind it hadn't been clear just how bad it was. Two deca-orns was a frighteningly short time away. "I've called you here to discuss," Megatron added, after the news had sunk in, "whether we'll be reducing allotments."

That was the end of the silence. An instant outcry filled the room, contributed by every Decepticon who needed and deserved his full allotment, and in fact probably needed more. Scrapper started

listing every ongoing project the Constructicons were working in the city, and Astrotrain babbled about the repairs his department had been made responsible for, while Starscream howled about his academy.

“- just got the site for it, after all this time waiting! I’m not going to delay its progress now, not when I’ve come so far!”

“Well what do you suggest we do?” Megatron asked archly, looking entirely unsurprised at the reaction and not very pleased either. “Your precious academy will have no fuel at all in the near future if you don’t scale back your consumption now.”

“Can’t we step up production on Earth?”

“I’ve already given the order. But I doubt Motormaster will be able to wring much more out of the slaves than we’ve already been getting. We just don’t have enough of them – which reminds me, Scrapper. That minibot I lent you for your crew? He’s going back.”

Scrapper’s mouth fell open. “But- my lord! I need him for demolition; we won’t be able to clear out sites half as fast without him. If you need another slave on Earth, why not send Starscream’s? He spends all his time complaining that he never wanted him.”

Perceptor happened to be in the middle of pouring a refill for Soundwave just then, and though he kept silent Soundwave saw the telltale tremble in his hands. Starscream, though, slapped his palm against the table with a snarl.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t need his assistance in my labs! That bot knows more about chemical compounds than any of you Constructicons put together, and I will not have him drilling crude oil from the desert like some common laborer. I need him in my new academy.”

“*If* there is an academy,” Megatron reminded him. Nobody else but Soundwave saw the astonishment and gratitude that flashed across Perceptor’s face.

“Wait,” Starscream said desperately. “Just- wait. Instead of all this talk about scaling back *our* needs, why not just raise the price of the energon? The public will buy less, and our consumption rate goes down. Simple, right?”

Soundwave was instantly wary. If he was unfamiliar with Shockwave’s projected use formulas, then he was even more so with Shockwave’s methods to determine the price of energon. All he did know was that it was very complicated, and Shockwave was extremely careful about initiating changes.

“Consideration,” he spoke up cautiously, “effects of such abrupt price raise unknown. Perhaps consultation with Shockwave...”

He trailed off at the look on Megatron's face. Starscream's expression immediately turned both smug and condescending. "Oh, I think Shockwave's contributed enough to this situation. Don't you, Soundwave?"

"Only concern, more unrest among population."

"Then it's a good thing I can rely on your surveillance to root out dissidence," Megatron asked, hard edge in his voice, "isn't it?"

Unhappily Soundwave watched his optics kindle with a warning, and bowed his head in silent agreement. Megatron accepted the concession by leaning back in his seat and relaxing his glare. "Maybe I'll make a few more public appearances too," he added, and patted the cannon on his arm. "It can't hurt. Very well – we'll raise the price of the public's energon by twenty-five percent. Your allotments will be cut by ten percent."

"But you said –"

"Be grateful, Starscream." His voice turned hard again. "I was going to cut them by thirty percent. And Scrapper, the minibot goes back, at least until we've reestablished our former level of reserves. I suggest you make your peace with it."

Unhappily Scrapper bowed his head. "Yes, my lord."

"I believe we're done here. Everyone, dismissed."

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Soundwave spent the entire flight back home scrolling through Iacon's newsfeeds. There was no sign of the city having burnt to the ground, or any similar disaster. No explosions had been reported, nor floods, nor power outages. No patrolling Decepticon had logged any disturbance of the peace.

When Soundwave shamelessly hacked a number of civilian comms, there was not even a mention of the dancing slave. Somehow Soundwave found none of this to be reassuring, and it was in a severe state of trepidation that he touched back down on his balcony. The doors slid aside at his arrival and he entered his home, to find the twins parked on the couch and fixing him with big, shiny grins.

"Hey boss!"

"How was the meeting?"

"As expected. Jazz's location?"

He got his answer in the next nanoklik when a heavy weight dropped abruptly onto his back and shoulders, almost toppling him to the floor. Soundwave stumbled and regained his balance just in time, while a pair of black and white arms encircled his neck and held on fast.

“Guess who!” Jazz crowed into his audial.

“Jazz?” Soundwave was so startled he could not help but state the obvious. Unsuccessfully he tried to reach behind him to get a grip on his slave, but his build was not made for flexibility and Jazz was quicker, squirming and scrambling to keep his perch on Soundwave’s back. He laughed and said something about a lucky guess, darting his head to the far side every time Soundwave tried to look back over his shoulder.

“Can’t see me! I am the master of shpies – I am invishible!”

“Jazz, get down now.”

This provoked more laughter. “Thought you’d never ask! You know me, Shoundwave, I’m always ready to get down. But firshst we have to do a little dance... make a little love...”

He tried to plant a sloppy kiss on the plating of Soundwave’s mask, which gave Soundwave the chance to finally peel off Jazz’s claspings arms. He couldn’t move fast enough to catch Jazz, and his uncharacteristically clumsy slave fell in a heap on the floor. For some reason, this just tickled him even more and he erupted in hysterical giggles.

Soundwave looked at the twins again, who suddenly found other parts of the room absolutely fascinating. “Rumble,” he said flatly. “Frenzy.”

“You always blame us!”

“Fault, always yours,” Soundwave pointed out impatiently. “Confess actions. What harm inflicted on my slave?”

“It’s not anything that’s gonna hurt him,” Frenzy said defensively.

“Define *‘it’*.”

“It’s hardly nothin’ – just a little Street Fizz.” They cringed at the fury and blame rolling from Soundwave’s end of the link. “Well, things between you were moving so slow! And you weren’t gonna do anything about it. So we figured that we’d help by giving him something that loosened him up a little.”

“You know, made him more comfortable.”

“And now he’s comfortable.”

“So get busy with the bot already.”

“And do us a favor and stop slamming your end of the link shut before the fun happens.”

Jazz, meanwhile, had been determinedly if not very swiftly picking himself up off the floor. Using Soundwave as a crutch, he eventually made it to standing. This put him at optic level with Soundwave's chest glass, which gave him another idea. "Knock knock!" he sang, rapping against the glass. "Anybody home? I've got a lovely assortment of vacuum cleaners to sell you!"

"I... might have given him a little too much.”

"I thought I was supposed to drug him!"

"Enough," Soundwave snapped, exasperated and attempting to fend off Jazz's wandering hands. "Twins' actions, reckless and foolish. Both of you, fortunate that Jazz not yet seriously injured. Your punishment, no video games for one orn.”

Instantly the twins let loose with a stream of dismayed whining and supplication, which bore a curious resemblance to the whining of Decepticon officers in the meeting earlier, and which Soundwave ended with a peremptory warning through the link.

"Quiet. And dismissed. No time for concern with you now, Jazz requires full attention." He scooped his slave up into his arms and turned his back on the cassettes, trying to carry Jazz into his berthroom without letting Jazz squirm out of his grasp and fall again. Jazz wasn't inclined to make it easy. Obviously it had been a long time since Jazz's arrival in his home, because he'd forgotten just how *wriggly* Jazz could get. With a squeal he thrashed and slithered out between Soundwave's arms, just when Soundwave had managed to get him to the berth. Somehow he managed to land without hurting himself and simultaneously roll away to better face Soundwave.

“Throwing me on your berth now?” He propped his head up on one hand, batting the light within his visor. “Mr. Soundwave, you’re trying to seduce me.”

“Negative.”

“You want me to seduce *you*. Okay, I can do that! Jazz never fails to please.” He pushed himself upright, uncurling into a slightly unsteady standing position. Human music started thumping from his speakers. “You want me to give you a show, don’t you? I wanted to dance for you tonight, but

you weren't there. I'll dance for you now, lover. Nobody can resist the power of my dancing!"

"Jazz, dancing not advisable -" Soundwave stopped short when he realized what Jazz had said. "Clarify circumstances of 'there'."

"Shh." Jazz placed an admonishing finger over his mouth. "Don't talk over Barry."

"Jazz, come down." He was starting to sway, tipping dangerously far in each direction, and Soundwave kept tensing in preparation to catch him. "Actions, unsafe."

Jazz ignored him, crooning along with the human singer, but then paused mid-sway with a glimmer of lucidity in his visor. "Hey," he said abruptly. "I think those little twin devils drugged me. Oh I am going to make them *very* sorry for that. But in the meantime... I've got some energy to burn. C'mere and help me out with that."

"Negative. Exploitation of this compromised state, not intended. Soundwave, not in need of chemical assistance to establish control over possessions. Desired goal to see Jazz willing -"

"Too many big words!" Jazz declared, and launched himself at Soundwave with a speed and determination Soundwave had been unprepared for. For the second time that night he was nearly knocked off balance, and managed to stay upright only because Jazz was so comparatively small. His hands were everywhere, crawling into the gaps between armor, rubbing sensors, fondling wires. With considerable effort Soundwave pushed back against the assault, staggering back to the berth and tipping them both onto it. "Now we're talking," Jazz announced with satisfaction, when Soundwave had him pinned firmly to the berth. "Let me see, now, it's been a few years but they say you never forget..."

Languidly he trailed the tip of his glossa under the edge of Soundwave's facemask, moistening a minor sensor, and then blew lightly. Immediately and entirely without Soundwave's consent, his mask popped open. "Bingo!" He lifted his head and claimed an enthusiastic kiss on Soundwave's mouth, wrapping his legs around Soundwave's waist when he tried to pull away.

"Jazz, no. My victory, inevitable. Your future willingness, certain. These circumstances as first time, not desired."

"This is why everybody calls you the killjoy," Jazz complained. "Forget the future. I need you *now*. Ooh, my wires are burning hot." He writhed unhappily under Soundwave's grip, thrusting his hips against Soundwave's. "I'm so hot for you, lover, I want you hard. I want to drive this electricity into your wires and make you burn with me, want to light this whole berth on fire. Take me! Take me now!"

It took some considerable self-control, but Soundwave held his ground. "Jazz, answer is no."

"But I'm dying here!"



Wearily Soundwave vented, and tried to remind himself that this situation was not Jazz's fault. If he didn't get relief soon, he would be in terrible pain. "Jazz, compromise offered."

"I don't want compromise, I want you to bang me all over this room!"

Soundwave nearly choked on his next words, and had to concentrate to get them out. "Soundwave, pleased by your eagerness. Order given: touch yourself, for me. Bring yourself to overload, for my watching pleasure."

"Just self-loading?" Jazz looked disappointed. "You won't take me?"

"Order given." Soundwave dropped a light kiss on Jazz's lips. "This, my desire. Jazz, intending to disappoint?"

"I would never disappoint you, my love. I would do *anything* for you."

Soundwave's spark ached to hear those words, however chemically induced they might have been. Jazz's visor was glowing a lush, deep blue, his vents panting, his armor hot to touch. It was so easy to believe it was genuine. All it would take was one word, and Jazz would be completely his.

... for one night. And then tomorrow Jazz would remember none of it, or worse, remember all of it and retreat from what progress he had made. At worst Jazz would be hurt and betrayed, at best Soundwave would remember a night that was nothing but a meaningless blur in Jazz's memory.

Either way, it wasn't what he wanted. Excruciating though it was, Soundwave released his grip on Jazz's wrists and rolled away, putting distance between them. "Then begin. Touch only yourself; contact with me, forbidden."

"As you command." Jazz batted his optical light at him again, his palms gliding lightly over the curves of his chest armor. Fingertips traced the seams between plates, teasingly, as if Jazz wanted to taunt himself. He rolled a moan down his throat and arched his back, thrusting his hips into his hands. His legs spread, to open the gaps between plates, and he nudged his fingers inside. Within he would be rubbing his own wires, goading his own sensors into a rush of pleasurable input, and Soundwave's own wires heated up in empathetic response. Jazz groaned and thrust faster, working furiously with his right hand, while he moved his left hand back upstairs. Slowly, deliberately, he inserted one finger after another in his mouth, licking and sucking at them. He never looked away from Soundwave. In and out, he glided his fingers in so deep, almost to the point of gagging on them, mimicking the timing of his other hand as fingers plunged between armor. Soundwave's fans had begun to spin, whirling excess heat out of his body, but they couldn't hope to compete with the image Jazz was presenting to him right now. Oh but his slave was gorgeous.

Jazz heard the fans and grinned. Soundwave had assumed an overload was imminent, but Jazz was a performer. Just when it seemed he might go over the edge he stopped, vents wheezing, and traced his moistened fingers down along the exposed wires and cables in his neck. Here too he moaned, and wiggled his fingers between the wires, eliciting fresh bursts of heat and sensory input. His palms

ghosted down over the glass of his headlights, then under the curve of the bumper, while his body rocked and then tipped to one side. Smoothly he rolled over and up onto his knees, keeping them well spread, and lowered his chest to the berth. Soundwave had an excellent view of both his hands going back to the gaps between hip armor, thrusting with redoubled vigor. The small moans and grunts became more frequent, and he could hear Jazz's engine revving to a higher pitch with every new push of his fingers. His head was turned to the side, so as not to break optical contact with Soundwave, and a wicked smile spread across his face when he heard his fans kick up a notch. With great care, and obvious delight, Jazz extended his glossa and *licked* the berth.

Soundwave stifled a gasp, and that was enough to send Jazz over the edge. His visor crackled white, and tiny gold sparks flew out of every seam. He shuddered, from head to pede, and collapsed in a heap to the berth.

Except for the breathy ventilations on both their parts, the room went silent. After a few klicks, Jazz rolled partway onto his side to face Soundwave again. His smile was wan, but content.

"Did I satisfy, my love?"

"Affirmative. Task, performed well."

"May I kiss you?"

"Contact, allowed." Soundwave nodded, and Jazz picked himself up enough to crawl the distance between them. The kiss was short, but tender and affectionate. Jazz dropped back onto the berth again when they were done, visor already dimming.

"Only one round... but I'm so tired already."

"Jazz must rest. Effects of chemical interference, physically exhausting." Soundwave helped turn Jazz onto his back and cradled him in the crook of his arm, stroking the curve of his helm. "Jazz."

"Mmm?"

"Escape from first slavery, accomplished how?"

"I don't think I'm supposed to tell you that," Jazz mumbled, light flickering uncertainly behind his visor.

"You can," Soundwave pressed gently. "Tell me. Trust me."

Jazz hesitated, and Soundwave wondered if there was enough of his consciousness left in there to

put up a fight. But then he spoke again. “They were never gonna let me go... so I had to do it.”

“Do what?”

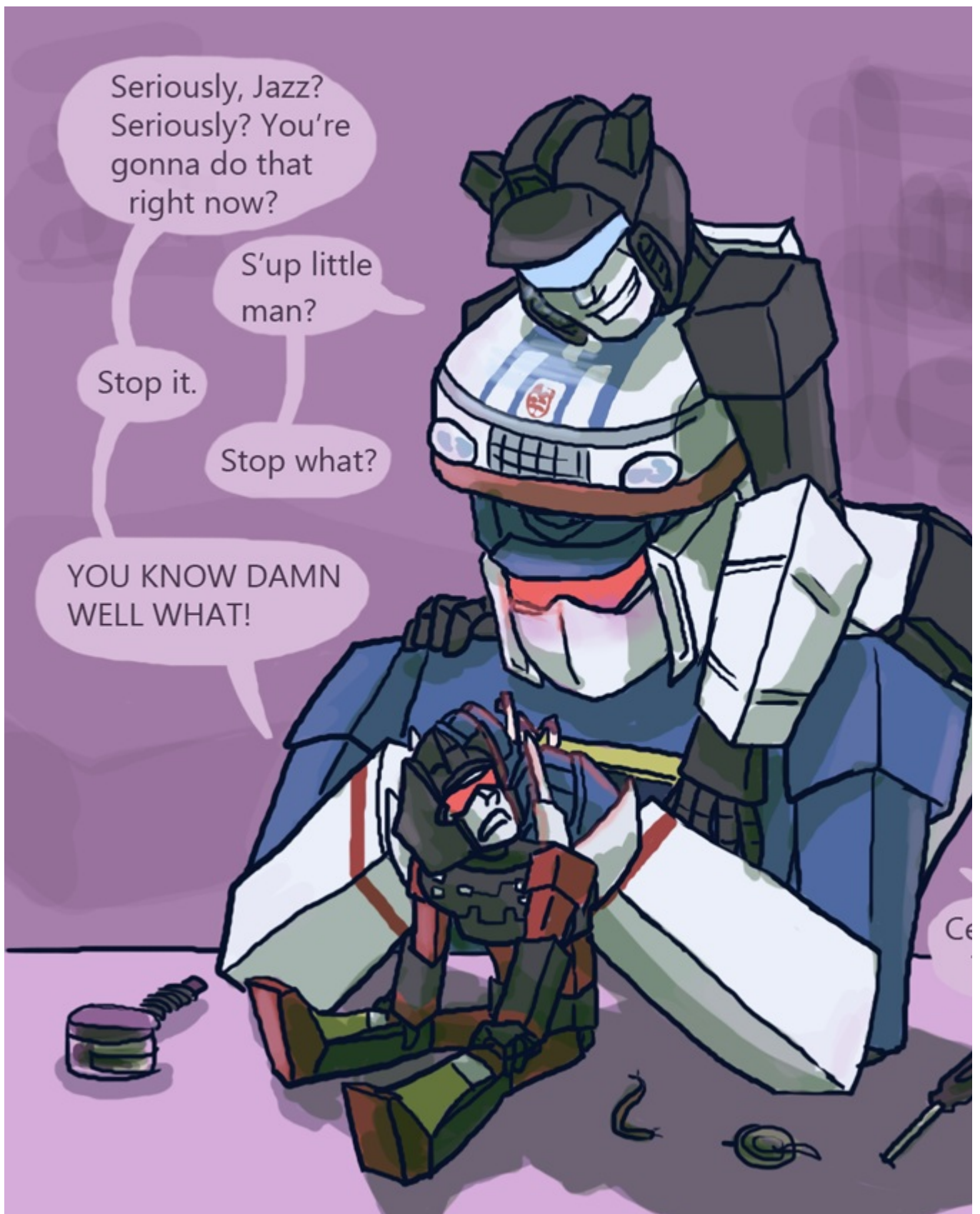
“Use their trust. I took turns whispering into their audios, tricked the three of them into hating each other. Then they killed each other.”

Something in Soundwave’s spark chilled, as he gazed down at the sleepy slave that was anything but harmless. “Soundwave, will not allow you to do same to us.”

This prompted some chuckling, and Jazz cupped the edge of Soundwave’s face with his hand. “Oh Soundwave. I could never hurt you. You... are my *everything*.” The light behind his visor sputtered out for good, and Jazz dropped into recharge.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters



A birthday present for me, years before this scene was written. Swindleslog had no idea that I did actually plan on having Jazz play piggyback on Soundwave later in the story, so upon receiving the birthday present I grandly promised her to stay tuned and be amused. Though the circumstances are slightly different, I still like to think that Soundwave's light blush would remain exactly the same.

## on the floor

Soundwave was counting, since the beginning of their walk, how many times Jazz had opened and then closed his mouth without speaking. That he'd reached three times already was remarkable for such an otherwise talkative mech, but just now he did it again for the fourth time and then subsided in silence. Amused, Soundwave gave no indication that he'd seen, and simply continued on his way. It took exactly 3.462 breems before Jazz finally broke.

"So?"

"Jazz?"

"I give up; I have to know. On a scale of one to a million, how much did I embarrass myself last night?"

"Question, not understood."

"Don't you play innocent with me! Last night I went out for a walk with the twins; next cycle I woke up alone in the berth with a raging headache. You left for work without making me get up, and you left fuel and cold compress packs by the berth. I can do math, Soundwave. Those anklebiting fiends laced my cube with something, and I am quite sure that I did not disappoint for results."

"Jazz, partially at fault," Soundwave pointed out, without denying any of it. "Took fuel from source other than your master's hand. Jazz knows my rules."

"What was I supposed to do?" Jazz bounced a little in agitation. "You left in such a rush, and you didn't feed me extra first. I was hungry! Rumble brought me a cube... it's not like I was going to say no."

"Then clearly, more training needed."

"Pervy control freak," Jazz remarked sourly, but without much force and followed by a tiny sigh.

"Well, anyway, it happened. I drank the cube, and I'm sorry. Master. But please don't keep me in suspense; what did I do? Or should I say, what did we do?"

His gesticulations were getting more flustered, and Soundwave was now thoroughly enjoying his nervousness. "Jazz, remembers nothing?"

"Did I dance on the berth? I've been known to do that on a fair number of occasions, drunk or sober."

"Initially, yes. Jazz, very energetic."

"And after the dancing?"

"Jazz, also very creative."

Jazz gulped, and the light behind his visor paled a little. "Well? How... far did we get? Did you, as the humans say, steal a home run?"

"This phrase, not understood. But presumed meaning: did interface occur." Soundwave looked at Jazz's anxious face and decided to put him out of his misery. "Answer is negative."

“What? Really?” Jazz stopped in his tracks and stared at Soundwave, astonished. “We didn’t?”

“Jazz, disappointed?”

“No!” Hastily Jazz started walking again. “Just assessing the scoreboard. Had you cheated, I’d have subtracted a point. You... really didn’t take advantage of me last night?”

“Jazz knows lying, never practiced.”

Jazz did know that, and Soundwave could see his armor plates relax and settle. He looked impressed in spite of himself. “Well I hate to admit it, but that’s actually very decent of you, Soundwave. No Decepticon I know would have held back. Can think of a few Autobots that wouldn’t have either. Classy.” He snuck a half-smile in his direction, to which Soundwave nodded in acknowledgement. For a while they walked in companionable silence, until Soundwave broached a new question.

“At certain point during last night, Jazz alluded to public dancing earlier. Details recalled?”

Jazz’s visor flickered rapidly from the effort of thinking, but eventually he shrugged. “I remember going into a nightspot, but it’s right about then that things start getting hazy. You’d have to ask the twins. Speaking of the devils – don’t go near the coolant dispenser for a while. It’s no worse than they deserve.”

Duly noted. Soundwave relayed the advice to his other three symbiotes, content to let Rumble and Frenzy learn their lesson. A temporary moratorium on video games was really not quite enough punishment, after all.

“Anyway, if you’re worried, we could always go check it out right now. If I was on stage, trust me, someone will remember. And I could always be persuaded to give an encore...” Playfully he nudged Soundwave’s arm and skipped a syncopated step, but Soundwave shook his head firmly.

“Negative. First reason, this discussion conducted once before. Public witness for such behavior not desired –“

“Nobody cares about what Shockwave thinks now anyway.”

“Second reason, presence required elsewhere now.”

“Huh?” For the first time, Jazz actually looked around and noticed their surroundings, and the path they’d been gradually following through downtown. “Hey, we’re going into the factory district. Why are we going there? I hate the factory district; it’s so depressing.” He wrinkled his nasal plating in distaste at the increasingly shabby surroundings.

“Megatron, inspecting refinery plant. My attendance, necessary.”

“Megatron? Oh, suddenly I feel ill again. I’m dizzy, and my fuel tank hurts.” Purposefully Jazz staggered, turning a neat one hundred and eighty degrees in the same motion. “We’d better get home, quick.”

Soundwave snagged his elbow and pulled Jazz back in the right direction, before he could get away. “Jazz, come. This visit necessary, and your best behavior expected.”

“Yeah, that really worked out the last time. Why do I get the feeling that was more about you than me, by the way?”

“Jazz, hush.”

“What happened between you, while he was busy crushing your neck?”

“Quiet.”

This time Jazz obeyed, but not happily. He scowled and walked the rest of the way in silence, reflecting the mood of the city around them. It was true; the factory district was never very appealing to look at. Massive industrial plants consumed whole blocks, ugly and smelling of old burnt fuel. The mecha that came here to work were the poorest in the city, shuffling about in the grime with the resigned air of those who know this will always be their lot in life. Watching them, Soundwave could not blame anyone for preferring to stake their livelihood on selling trinkets in the market instead.

Soundwave walked past several before arriving at the designated refinery, walking past the entrance guards without acknowledging their hasty bows. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw were already here, circling overhead in wide loops, recording all that went on. Megatron had come to take a surprise tour of the plant, as one of his promised ‘public appearances’. Now Soundwave could see him just ahead, covering the ground in his trademark long strides while the head overseer scurried alongside. A crowd of anxious shareholders trailed them, not that they had much say here. Soundwave knew that Shockwave had arranged, in his meticulous and ever-pervasive way, for no one civilian to hold a controlling interest in any of the refineries. Neutrals wealthy enough had paid him their investments, but by law the empire owned at least half. Since the end of the war the refineries had managed to provide enough for a healthy surplus in stored energon, but now that surplus was almost gone and new refinement distressingly slow-paced. Soundwave could already hear Megatron’s displeased remarks about the level of production.

He may have come here to inspire greater output, but Soundwave had come to watch his audience. Though the aerials were recording all they could, the new price of energon had gone into effect this morning and Soundwave wanted to see the state of the crowds for himself. Hyperalert to any sign of a negative reaction to Megatron’s presence, he scanned the staring workers. Megatron knew he was there, but did not summon him closer, and so Soundwave kept a discreet distance. This annoyed Jazz, of course, who was trying to catch Bluestreak’s optic for a small wave.

“Yes yes,” Megatron was saying impatiently, “I can see your new silos and the state of the art piping system. What I do not see is any kind of impressive output flowing from them. Are you unacquainted with the realities of Cybertron? Energon is scarce and my city is hungry. I supply unending fuel to your loading docks, don’t I? Given you everything you need to process and refine energon, don’t I?”

He paused, and the white-opticked manager waited in increasingly awkward silence. “Don’t I?”

“Yes! Yes, my lord, you do all those things. We do work very hard -”

“Then is it incompetence holding you back? Because if it is not equipment and it is not effort, it must be competence that you lack.”

“My lord, please have mercy. The rioting did some damage to our plant too, and we lost some workers -”

“Is excuses all you can produce in this plant?”

If Soundwave thought his optics were white before, he was surprised now at just how bleached they could get. “I- I do not mean to give excuses, my lord, only reasons. If you will allow us time to recover from them -”

Soundwave was calculating how many nanokliks were left before Megatron's patience ran out and the manager was thrown against the nearest wall, but the sharp squeal of high performance engines interrupted all of them. Everyone looked up just as three vehicle models came tearing around the massive silos, headed straight into the surprised cluster of mecha. All three of them yelped and braked hard, the two in the rear managing to turn and screech to a halt in time. The fastest of them had no chance at all, and flipped over his own bumper trying. He spun back end over front, transformed mid-air, and somehow managed to land on his pedes just short of crashing into Megatron. Sparks flew out from the metal scraping against the ground, and he gaped up at Megatron in pure dumb shock.

"Oh my -"

"You stupid, disrespectful, half-clocked twist on a glitch!" Furious and horrified, the apoplectic overseer swatted the mech hard on the head. "How could you be so careless? You're a disgrace to our factory!" Again and again he hit the mech, eliciting an "ow!" even as he tried to kneel before Megatron. For his part, Megatron peered down at the grounder with the curiosity of one trying to decide whether something is worth killing or not.

"Tell me, is it a common habit to spend the work joors racing through these factory grounds?"

"No, my lord!" the manager hurried to answer.

"Yes," the worker answered matter of factly, at the same time, "my lord." His superior choked, and Megatron's optic ridges rose a fraction.

"Oh? Explain."

"In my work unit, we figured out that short sprints around the compound boosts our energy and we can work the refiners faster. Plus the loser has to come in early the next cycle to oil up the cogs. We don't break down half so often now." He answered the question promptly and plainly, with no trace of defensiveness in his tone. He fidgeted a little under everyone's stares, confused by the shocked looks. "We've, uh, been putting out another fifty cubes on top of quota every cycle, since we started them. I'm sorry I didn't ask permission. We didn't think it would be any harm. And I'm really, really, really sorry that we almost crashed into you. We didn't know there would be guests here today."

"An impertinence I can overlook, for the moment." Something in Megatron's posture shifted, a glint of approval in his optics, and he motioned the worker to stand. "Fifty cubes, you say, and all from a simple new idea. Aren't you clever? Now that is the kind of ingenuity I like to see. That's the kind of ingenuity that helped me win the war. Refreshing to find it in someone so young."

Young he obviously was, Soundwave observed, watching as comprehension and then awe filtered into the mech's face. The details of his vehicular model indicated he'd been built and sparked after the war had already begun, perhaps even after Iacon had been overtaken. Life under Decepticon rule was probably all he'd ever known. The blue light of his optics practically shimmered with amazement and worship, at such praise from his emperor.

"My lord Megatron, thank you! You honor me."

"Yes, I do." Megatron was eyeing the mech with more than a passing interest, which Soundwave did not miss. Though he may be just a grounder and a factory grunt, the mech was attractive. The most flamboyant paintjob Soundwave had ever seen, but his build was slim and streamlined and he flaunted a spoiler almost as jaunty as a Seeker's wings. He was very much Megatron's type.



Megatron took a moment longer to enjoy the view, but then he turned back to the clearly dismayed overseer. “You should take notes from this young worker, manager. Don’t be afraid to be inventive. It is not the Decepticon way to mindlessly defend old traditions, but to try new things.”

“Such as slavery,” Jazz muttered, and Soundwave nudged him to be quiet.

“Propping up old and useless systems is for Autobots, after all!” Megatron gave a hearty laugh and clapped Bluestreak hard on the back, with so much force that the unprepared slave was knocked over and fell to his hands and knees. Megatron laughed again, and the rest of the group dutifully laughed along with him. Soundwave heard the soft growl in Jazz’s chest, and put a hand on his shoulder just in time to keep him from moving forward. Looking humiliated, the little Praxian stared at the filthy ground and gulped back what could have almost been a sob, doorwings twitching faintly. Then something happened that nobody, Soundwave least of all, could have ever predicted. The young neutral bent forward and extended his hand to Blustreak.

Megatron’s laughter subsided rather abruptly, as did everyone else’s. Soundwave could hear the soft hiccup of surprise in Jazz’s vocalizer, while Bluestreak stared at the hand as if he didn’t quite understand what it was for. The neutral didn’t seem aware of the astonished stares now fixed upon him, only smiled kindly and waited for a response. Eventually Bluestreak put his hand in the other’s, face still blank with bewilderment, and allowed himself to be helped up to his pedes. That business accomplished, the young mech stepped back and returned his beaming gaze to Megatron.

“Well then.” It took a few nanokliks, but Megatron regained his bearing. “You’d best get back to work. Dismissed.” To the overseer he turned, motioning impatiently. “Carry on, I intend to examine the entire plant.”

“Yes, my lord, of course.” Nervously the manager’s gaze flicked back to his employee, but since Megatron had said nothing then he hardly could either. He bowed his head and turned to start walking again, and Megatron and the others followed. The friends of the young neutral, and any other low-class worker near enough, promptly gravitated to surround him as he left in the opposite direction. Their conversation buzzed with giddy excitement over his personal encounter with the great Lord Megatron, full of teasing and laughter. Jazz took a step after them, his gaze fixed on the young mech.

“Jazz,” Soundwave prompted, and got no response. His pedes took one step after another, his visor a pale blank blue as if in a trance. “Jazz!”

“Huh? Yes?” Visibly Jazz woke up, optical light flickering, and looked at Soundwave as if surprised to find himself three steps away.

“That mech, known to you?”

Jazz shook his head, but Soundwave didn’t miss the twitch of reflexive hesitation that came first. “I-I don’t know him.”

“Jazz,” Soundwave said, this time with an undercurrent of warning in his tone.

“I don’t, really. But... maybe that’ll change.” A thoughtful little smile tugged at Jazz’s lips as he watched the young mech and his friends disappear around a corner. “It’s like I’m always saying: I love the factory district. It’s so full of surprises.”

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The sixth breem was ticking past, just as silently and uneventfully as the five that came before it. Soundwave was a patient mech, but as he watched Jazz from across the hax set he could feel that patience starting to wither. Jazz hadn't even looked at the set, and though Soundwave knew he probably didn't need to, he didn't like the way Jazz's gaze had fixed so dreamily onto empty space. That was not a look of plotting hax strategies, that was a look of wandering attention and inappropriate thoughts. As breem seven marched closer, Soundwave was beginning to wonder if perhaps Jazz's mind was on something – or someone – else.

“Subject of Jazz's thoughts?” he asked abruptly, when the uncharacteristically short supply of patience had run out. Startled, Jazz shot him a look of blank incomprehension.

“My move, of course.”

“Jazz, taking unusually long time.”

“Maybe I'm at a critical point,” Jazz said flippantly, and narrowed his gaze a fraction. “What's with you, anyway? You've been a little touchy ever since that field trip to the refinery yesterday. I don't know why. You know it wasn't my idea to go.”

“Some attraction to its inhabitants apparently found regardless,” Soundwave answered stiffly, and promptly hated that condescending smile.

“Ah. This is about those big blue optics and the flashy spoiler, isn't it? Oh Soundwave, your seething jealousy is cute, but you needn't waste energy on that trademark glare of disapproval. He's really not my type. I don't care for his taste in tacky flame decals, or dictators. Another klik, and he'd have been humping Megatron's leg in front of all of us.”

Optical light rolled behind the visor, his grin easy and casual. There was no mention of Bluestreak and how the young neutral had helped him up, as if it had never happened. Soundwave didn't like that.

“Jazz, sure that mech unknown to you?”

“I told you before, I don't know him. You know that if it was a lie, I'd have done a better job of it. And if you still don't believe me and want to check for yourself, well -” He flicked the side of his head and pointed meaningfully at Soundwave's. “I'm ready to tango again whenever you are, my lovely.”

Soundwave stared frigidly across the table, and Jazz shrugged. “Suit yourself. I don't know why you're so antsy about it, anyway. He's just some nobody kid from the ghettos. He's younger than Laserbeak, even. Probably didn't even get sparked until after I went into special ops. There's no way I could know him...”

There it was again, that reflexive flash of hesitation that nobody else but Soundwave could have noticed. He leaned closer. “But?”

“But... it's funny.” An uncertain smile flickered across his face, full of doubt. “Even though I keep telling myself that, I've got this nagging feeling that I've met him somewhere before. Can't think how that would be, but maybe it'll come to me. Or perhaps you, avid student of my personal history, can figure it out and tell me.” He chased away the doubt with a cheeky smile for Soundwave. “Promise to keep me posted, okay?”

Soundwave would not have deigned to reply to that, but even if he'd tried he would have been interrupted by the twins' noisy return home. Sulkily they clumped into the room and cast despairing

looks at their entertainment console.

“Hey.”

“We’re home.”

“Where we will not be playing any video games.”

“Again.”

“Can’t we cut this punishment short, boss?”

“Our skills will get rusty!”

“One orn,” Soundwave reminded them calmly. They scowled as they crossed the room, and Soundwave noted how they skirted rather widely around the coolant dispenser.

“Thanks for the *bath*, Jazz.”

“Thanks for the drink,” Jazz retorted.

“Rumble, Frenzy, earlier remark made by Jazz indicated possible dancing in public, during time under your supervision. Give full account and description, now.”

“Yes, as full and detailed as possible, boys,” Jazz drawled. “Don’t hold back. Did I amaze and enthrall the watching crowds, utterly blowing all minds with my talent, or did I merely dazzle them?”

The twins took one look at Jazz’s smug anticipation, then exchanged a fairly smug look of their own. “Actually, that would be a ‘neither’.”

“We took Jazz to a nightspot hoping that he would put on a good show.”

“Since he’s always braggin’ about it.”

“But don’t get too mad at us, boss.”

“Because even after he got good and fizzed, he refused to dance.”

“He said he couldn’t it without you there to watch.”

From across the hax table, Soundwave could hear Jazz’s vents stutter and choke. “I d-did not!”

“We were,” Rumble went on to say, maliciously gleeful, “of course, recording.”

“It was so sweet.”

“So devoted.”

“Touching, really.”

The blue glow behind Jazz’s visor was overbright, flushing deeper by the nanoklik. On a very few occasions in the past, Soundwave had sometimes thought he glimpsed Jazz blushing, but never gotten a good enough look to be sure. Now Jazz had no chance of hiding it, staring dumbstruck at the wickedly grinning twins.

“Enough,” Soundwave spoke up. “Twins, due for upload of reports, dismissed to office. Upload will begin momentarily.”

“Yes, boss,” they sang cheerfully, throwing identical triumphant smirks at Jazz before sailing on into the next room. Soundwave could almost feel sorry for his slave. Not even when he was wearing a dead glitchmouse across his chest had he looked so flabbergasted. To borrow a word that Jazz had used against him earlier, it was ‘cute’. Soundwave stood, and paused by his mortified slave so that he might briefly caress Jazz’s face with his hand.

“Your distress, unnecessary,” he consoled. “Soundwave, willing to play past ten points.” He gave Jazz a final pat on the cheek, and followed the twins.

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Processing the new surveillance report took him well past the day shift’s end. By the time he emerged from his office, the common room was empty and his berthroom dark. Jazz was curled up on the far side of the berth, back to the door, utterly still. Soundwave was not fooled. His highly sensitive audial receptors could hear Jazz’s systems still running at a pitch that indicated consciousness.

“Jazz, query.”

Jazz hunched a little further into himself. “Can’t you see I’m pretending to sleep?”

“Jazz will look at me.” Soundwave sat on his own side of the berth and tugged on Jazz’s shoulder, rolling him over to make optical contact. Jazz didn’t resist, though his expression was set into a hard sulk. “Answer inquiry: why Jazz so compelled to dance?”

The sulk vanished in a puff of bewilderment. “What?”

“Logical assumption, its associated memories unpleasant,” Soundwave pointed out, and Jazz propped himself up on one elbow.

“No, the slavery was unpleasant. The dancing I loved. Never stopped loving it.”

“Consideration, Jazz designed for dance. Your enjoyment, only the result of core programming?”

He shrugged. “I stopped asking myself that question a thousand vorns ago. What does it matter? Programmed, not programmed, doesn’t make me any less good at it. Doesn’t make it any less fun when I’m on the floor. You’ve got your own basic protocols, put in there without your say-so. But would you ever stop protecting and sheltering those kids?”

His argument had merit. “This dancing, important to you.”

“More than nearly anything,” Jazz sighed. Pale blue against the dark, his visor shone with wistfulness. “It’s the one thing that’s always been mine. When I’m dancing, it’s the closest that I can feel to being free.”

Yet he would do it for no one but Soundwave, a fascinating contradiction in itself. Soundwave considered that, and made his decision. Without warning, he scooped Jazz into his arms and rolled off the berth, provoking a startled yelp.

“Hey! What the- drag me onto the berth, drag me off the berth... why don’t you ever make up your

mind?"

Soundwave gave no answer and marched through the common room, kicking on his thrusters once he'd reached the balcony. Cybertron fell away from beneath them, cool air flowing over them both as Soundwave flew through the night. It was a different landscape underneath than the usual; with the onset of the night cycle the destinations of Iacon's dwellers changed. Mecha migrated from the factory districts and relatively wholesome day markets into the leisure districts, where intoxication and prostitution thrived. Here nightspots lined the streets, blaring with as many lights as they could afford. Through his cameras and his roaming symbiotes, some of them more frequent visitors than others, Soundwave was well acquainted enough with the district layout but had almost no personal experience here. Almost. It was in this district that he'd come to consume one single drink of high-grade, and wound up winning Jazz in a card game instead.

"What's going on?" Jazz demanded, tumbling out of his arms as soon as Soundwave touched down. "Did you get lost? Forget what time it is? Did you forget who *you are*?"

"Soundwave, unfamiliar with individual establishments," he answered calmly. "Jazz, therefore, must choose."

His slave gaped at him. "Choose?"

"For dancing venue."

"Are- are you serious?"

"Always."

"You... would let me dance? In a nightspot, with real music, no hiding?" He clapped hands over his bare wrists, disbelieving. "I'm not even wearing my chains!"

"Jazz, convinced proper dancing not possible with them."

Jazz looked like he might fall over. Soundwave watched a giddy grin spread across Jazz's face, savoring the image. "What made you change your mind?"

"Changed political climate leaves risk of undesirable witnesses diminished," Soundwave said practically, then went a little further. "And, Jazz requires dancing to be happy. Happiness for Jazz, much desired." Gently he cupped Jazz's face with one hand, one thumb stroking softly against his plating. "Refusal to dance without my presence, made explicit. Therefore, for Jazz's happiness, this venture made necessary."

"For a mech that everyone calls the most boring Decepticon in the army, you keep managing to surprise me." Jazz trembled slightly under Soundwave's touch, but it wasn't in fear. More like he was quivering with excitement. Had Soundwave just offered him the world, he could not possibly have looked any happier. "I don't know how to say thank you."

"Jazz, wasting the time left before curfew."

"You're right - the night is not young, and the music is waiting. Let's do this!" Jazz covered Soundwave's hand with his own, squeezing it briefly before using the grip to tug Soundwave to the closest nightspot. Once within range of its music, however, Jazz flinched, made a face, and backed away.

"Or we could just douse our audios in hot acid and get it over with quicker. Let me see, let me see... Ah, here we go! I know this place, the deejay knows his business." Eagerly Jazz towed him to

another nightspot two doors down. Obliging Soundwave allowed himself to be led inside, ignoring the wide-opticked stares of those neutrals loitering in the entrance. "Skywarp used to bring me here sometimes. If only he'd known he had a much better dancer sitting by his chair than those kids fumbling around on stage. Not that I would have danced for him anyway."

"Jazz, more inclined to such activities as tripping server drones to splash fuel on master."

Jazz nearly tripped on his own pedes and spun around to face Soundwave, even as he continued to tug him deeper inside. "You saw that?"

"Affirmative."

His visor flushed again, just a little, but Jazz was laughing. "How embarrassing. I admit it, that was the most lowbrow of my humor, but in my defense it was a bad night. Skywarp hadn't fed me for most of two cycles, I was hungry and dizzy. Tripping a drone was the best I had in me."

"Jazz, lucky not to be caught."

"Oh, I never get caught," Jazz said breezily. "One of the charms of being me."

He laughed again, and something about the way he said that triggered an odd feeling in Soundwave. Something was not quite right, but a large and exceptionally drunk mech nearly lunged right into Jazz just then, and Soundwave had to shove him away. They'd entered the nightspot proper, and Soundwave was already taking an immediate dislike to its atmosphere. It was dark, lit mostly by lasers and random patterns of electric squares in the floor, and so thick with ambient noise that he was forced to dial down his audios to less than half their usual input. The crowds were nearly intolerable. Mecha surrounded him, wildly gyrating to the music instead of scurrying out of his way. It was either too dark for them to see he was a Decepticon, or they were too drunk to care. He braced a hand against some shoulders to push them aside, clearing a path for himself and Jazz.

"Some rules, necessary," he informed his slave, who was already starting to sway to the beat. Jazz smiled in a resigned, completely unsurprised sort of way.

"Of course, master. Tell me, what are the rules?"

"Jazz, not permitted to touch anyone. Other mecha, not permitted to touch Jazz."

"Are you planning on telling them that?"

"Jazz will avoid contact to best of ability."

"You haven't been in many dance clubs, have you?"

"Jazz will also remain in my sight at all times."

"Now what would be the point if you couldn't see me?"

"Also," Soundwave added, "Jazz should refrain from attracting too much attention."

"What's that?" Jazz shouted, over the din.

"Jazz should refrain from -"

"What? The music is too loud - can't hear you!"

"Jazz -"

His slave shrugged and blew him a kiss, visor sparkling merrily, and skipped out onto the dance floor. Soundwave cycled a vent in exasperation, but did not chase after him. Instead he circled around the edge of the floor, never taking his optics off Jazz, and found a comfortable lounge seat that would give him a good view. It was occupied, but it was the work of an astrosec to haul the overcharged neutral out of it and throw him aside. The mech opened his mouth to yell, saw the sigil on Soundwave's chest, and went to go find a new chair. Jazz, meanwhile, was just getting warmed up. He caught Soundwave's gaze and grinned at him, his movements getting faster and more complicated. This was a different performance than the one he'd put on in the quiet warehouse, presumably because this was a different style of music. His body undulated to the patterns of music, struts rippling in that way that only Jazz could manage. He was graceful and attractive, which caught the attention of some other dancers, who then tried to entice him into a more personal sort of dancing. Soundwave was pleased to watch Jazz evade their clumsy attempts, his pedes moving in fast and complex patterns that no one could keep up with. He made sure to always keep a clear view between himself and Soundwave.

The music shifted and changed to other beats, and Jazz never missed a one of them. His dancing became even more acrobatic, and he threw himself into tricks he could have never managed while in his chains. He leapt and rolled, and spun about on his hands, every flashy move blended seamlessly into the dance. Now the mecha backed off to give him a wider space, which in turn caught the attention of more in the crowd. Much to the consternation of the dancers on stage, struggling to entice tips from their audience, now almost everyone's attention was turning to Jazz. They clapped and cheered for him, roaring with delight whenever he pulled off yet another impossible combination. It was the spotlight, and Jazz relished it. But even with cries of enthusiasm and praise falling all around him, that blue visor stayed fixed on Soundwave. He was performing for no one else.

The owner of this place appeared at his elbow, bearing a tray with sparkling high-grade. "Compliments of the house, sir," he murmured. "Your patronage is greatly appreciated; it is always an honor to host a Decepticon in our humble establishment. Though it is, ah, unusual to bring one's own entertainment." He laughed nervously. "He is exceptionally talented. It would be my honor to display him on stage, and he would please my customers -"

"My slave, dancing for my pleasure," Soundwave informed him curtly. "His location, satisfactory." He glanced at the tray by his elbow. "Have coolant sent. My slave will require refreshment."

"Of course, sir." Abashed, the owner bowed and scuttled away. Soundwave doubted Jazz could have heard any of that, but perhaps he had guessed, because he was looking decidedly amused when Soundwave made optical contact again. A breem later, a pink and white femme who'd earlier been dancing on stage stomped up to Soundwave's table, plunked a vial of coolant down, shot a dirty look at Jazz and stomped away again. Unfazed, Jazz met the look with one of his insolent grins.

"Jazz." Soundwave beckoned him closer, and Jazz promptly bounced to his side. Disappointed, the crowd groaned. "Thirsty?"

"A little, yes." Vents wheezing, Jazz tumbled onto his lap and opened his mouth in expectation. Carefully Soundwave held the vial to his lips and tipped it back, allowing Jazz to gulp down the cooling liquid.

"Having fun?"

"So much so! I almost wish you could join me." He laughed at the expression that must have shown on Soundwave's face. "Well, we know that can't happen. Even if you would, you couldn't. Your model's just not built for it. I used to give Blaster no end of grief over that."

Soundwave couldn't help it; reflexively he tensed at the sound of Blaster's name. The night had been mostly pleasant, he was enjoying watching Jazz dance, but now a shadow fell on his good mood. Why did Jazz have to say that?

Jazz probably felt the new tension in Soundwave's posture, and knew exactly what had caused it. His visor dimmed, and he plucked up an apologetic smile. "You know, I think I've got one more in me."

He pushed aside the drink in Soundwave's hand and rolled off his lap, but to Soundwave's surprise he did not return to the main floor. He kept his dancing right in front of Soundwave, but it was a different kind of dancing now. The motions were slower and more deliberate, and apparently designed to draw Soundwave's attention to the seams and gaps on Jazz's body. He was more than a little startled when Jazz straddled his lap, chest armor gliding smoothly against his. With expert grace he slid away to the side, whipping around to embrace Soundwave from behind, hands exploring the edges of his chest compartment.

"You like this, lover?" Jazz murmured into one audio. "It's called a 'private dance'. Nobody's gotten this from me in thousands of vorns."

"This dance, unusual," Soundwave acknowledged, his spark spinning faster in his chest. "Enjoyed very much."

"Good. I would hate to think I've gotten rusty." Jazz oozed around to his front again, sliding back onto his lap. Arching his back, he tipped so far backward that his helm was nearly brushing the floor, displaying some impressive balance as well as flexibility. Though it wasn't as flashy as his earlier dancing on the floor, Soundwave knew this new personal dance was attracting some attention too. He saw pointed fingers and heard soft murmurs, optics in the dark turning to gaze on Jazz and his erotic display. Jazz didn't care and neither did Soundwave, who hadn't touched the high-grade but was starting to feel quite drunk with power. This gorgeous slave had so much to offer, everyone in this room coveted him, but he belonged to Soundwave alone. For Soundwave, he would dance. For Soundwave, he would do this, no orders necessary. What a prize it was that he kept in the palm of his hand.

The music shifted into something else, ending Jazz's personal dance. He sank back onto Soundwave's lap, vents panting, clearly spent by the effort of all his careful balancing. "Well?"

"Your performance, flawless," Soundwave praised. "Jazz, most beautiful when dancing."

"Do you want to know what it's like?"

What? Soundwave stared uncomprehendingly at Jazz, who didn't look the least little bit like he was joking. Optics locked with Soundwave's, he took one of Soundwave's hands and cupped it to his own head. He couldn't possibly be asking -

"It's okay," Jazz breathed. "I want you to. Everybody should know this feeling."

Soundwave's fingers flexed, gently firming his grasp on Jazz while he mentally reeled with shock. Nobody had ever invited him into their mind before, nobody had asked. His slave was slouched in his lap, tired and helpless, but his visor held the steady glow of trust. Jazz had invited, and Soundwave would oblige. His sensors shut down and he dove in.

JUST DANCE, GONNA BE OKAY! JUST DANCE, SPIN THAT RECORD BABE - DON'T STOP MAKE IT POP, DJ, BLOW MY SPEAKERS UP. TONIGHT I'M A FIGHT TIL WE SEE THE SUNLIGHT. TICK TOCK ON THE CLOCK, BUT THE PARTY DON'T STOP,



NO - WORK IT MAKE IT DO IT, MAKES US HARDER BETTER FASTER STRONGER.  
NOW THAT THAT DON'T KILL ME, CAN ONLY MAKE ME STRONGER. NEED YOU  
TO HURRY UP NOW -

One right on top of another, hundreds of songs about dancing streamed around him. There could never be just one, how could there be with so many memories to call upon? Jazz took him right back to the beginning, when he was young and scared and struggling to please his masters while on the stage. Vorns flew past and his steps became surer, his leaping and tumbling more daring, his posing done with more flair. The audiences changed, faces disappearing while new ones took their place. Jazz never stopped, his body whirling and bending to the music in perfect time. Through him, Soundwave tasted the thrill of the spotlight, and the sheer pride of a perfect performance. He felt the adrenaline flow through him like it did for Jazz, every part of his body moving in time to the beat. Faster, harder, sharper, better. The audience's awe was intoxicating. This was a pleasure like none other in the universe.

AND YOU KNOW ME NOW LIKE A MOTHER KNOWS A CHILD. AND YOU KNOW ME  
NOW LIKE I CAME FROM YOUR OWN BODY. I CAN FEEL YOUR PULSE LIKE A  
MOTH INSIDE A JAR, AND EVEN THIS IS STILL TOO FAR. The heady rush of memories dwindled away, and dimly Soundwave recognized that this last piece of human music pertained to nothing in the past, but was meant for here and now. It faded when he withdrew from Jazz's mind, his body overheated and venting hard. He could hear Jazz's body venting just as hard, and felt the hot touch of his plating as Jazz collapsed against him. He wanted to concentrate on the words to that song, try to puzzle out if there was any connection to the exploration of Jazz's willingly open mind, but there was no time for that now. Jazz was on him, kissing him, eagerly invading his mouth as if he starved for Soundwave's taste. And Soundwave kissed him back, unsurprised, and not caring for anything else in the world.

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## on bedfellows

“Who’s that?” Rumble jumped onto his console without warning or permission, patently ignoring all signs that Soundwave was working. He squinted at the picture on Soundwave’s right screen and sneered at it. “Nice paintjob. Did somebody tell him that flames are the new black? And what the- is that Jazz’s history file on the left screen? You’re reading it *again*? Why are you still obsessing over that?”

“Soundwave, merely conducting new research,” he answered patiently. “A question of Jazz’s past associations with this mech, unresolved. Answers required.”

“For frag’s sake, boss, why do you do this? You went through all this before, spent hours in the archives when we all told you to just forget about it, and what happened? You wound up with an answer that hadn’t meant anything in over a thousand vorns. It didn’t matter at all.”

That wasn’t true, for so many reasons, but Soundwave did not correct Rumble. His agitated symbiote didn’t seem interested in what he had to say anyway. Restlessly he paced to the center of the console and kicked the button to terminate his cross-referencing program. Both history files disappeared from the screen, along with some considerable unsaved progress.

“Rumble, that project not finished.”

“Who cares? That’s ancient history, and this is the slag that’s going down now. Got a surveillance upload for ya, boss, and you better get comfortable. There’s a lot of complaining about the empire to listen in on. This job was a lot easier when everyone loved the Decepticons.” Unhappily he huffed, then narrowed his gaze at Soundwave and cocked his head. “Speaking of which, were you interrogating someone last night? We thought we felt something.”

*Pounding music, Jazz’s plating hot against his own, the heady thrill of dance rushing through him as he sank deep into Jazz’s memories –* “Not quite,” Soundwave answered carefully.

“Whaddya mean, ‘not quite’?” Rumble looked baffled.

“It means, not your concern.”

“Well fine, be secretive! Not as if we, your loyal and hardworking symbiotes, need to know anything about it. We didn’t even know you were working last night; we thought you just took Jazz out for a late walk. You really should take us up on that whole idea of taking Jazz to a nightspot, you know. It’d be awesome fun.”

“Idea, will be considered.”

“Better sooner than later,” Rumble remarked, the scowl returning to his faceplates. “Don’t know how much longer we’ve got before those nightspots are all gone.”

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Jazz laughed to hear about it, on their walk later that cycle. “So you didn’t even tell him? They’re going to hear about it anyway, you know, they’re cassettes. It’s what they do. And they’re going to be slagging pissed at you when they find out they were left out of what was their idea.”

“Prediction: Rumble and Frenzy will express outrage at high volume. However this also known: Rumble and Frenzy would express such outrage regardless whether news learned from elsewhere or from me. Only difference is marginal time of peace before news learned and shouting begins. Therefore, delay in disclosure optimal course of action.”

“They’re your symbiotes.” Jazz shrugged. “You know them best. I’ll just have to make it very clear to them that it wasn’t at all my fault, and completely your idea.”

“Soundwave, completely responsible for idea to travel into leisure district and patronize nightspot? Symbiotes will not believe you.”

“Frag, I hate it when you’re right. Laserbeak won’t be happy with me at all.” Jazz grinned in resigned sort of way, darting neatly around a laborer hauling several crates. “Maybe next time they can -”

His next step nearly carried him straight into none other than Grand Premier Shockwave, blocking most of the walkway with his vast purple bulk. It was a sight so unexpected, and so unnerving, that Soundwave could hardly fault Jazz for yelping out loud and leaping three steps back. Nobody outside his mansion had seen Shockwave for orns. And even in the time before the riots, Shockwave hardly ever ventured into the grimy and bustling street markets of Iacon. Such environments were beneath him, even if he was happy to collect taxes from the merchants that worked here, and the merchants had proved well enough that they didn’t much care for him either. So to see Shockwave standing here, surrounded by haggling vendors and filthy beggars and looking painfully out of place in the process, was a shock on several levels. It was also an unpleasant one. Shockwave had no reason to be in a place like this, yet here he was standing squarely in their path, obviously informed of their habits and waiting for them. Reflexively Jazz skittered back to safety around Soundwave’s massive arm.

“Ah, it’s evil! Kill it, kill it!”

Taken aback by the noisy reaction, Shockwave blinked a few times and then glared hard at Jazz. “Greetings, Director Soundwave. Fancy meeting you here, of all places. I would speak with you, while you have some time to spare. *Alone*,” he added meaningfully, with another frosty glare for Jazz. His slave returned the glare in kind and wrapped his arms around Soundwave’s more massive one, hugging it tight to his chest.

“Why? Whatcha gonna do to him as soon as there’s no witnesses? Eat him?”

“Jazz,” Soundwave reprimanded mildly, tugging his arm out of his grasp. “Dismissed.”

“What? No! Soundwave, you can’t be alone with him, he’ll try to kill you!” Although there were hundreds of languages Jazz could have spoken in that Shockwave would not understand, Soundwave wryly noted that he stuck to plain Cybertronian and didn’t bother to lower his voice. In the corner of his vision he saw Shockwave bristle. Soundwave bent forward to better face Jazz, and took Jazz’s chin in a firm hold.

“And, Jazz thinks I would lose to him?”

“Well... no.”

“Then Jazz, dismissed. Amuse yourself in market; remain in sight.”

“How bout a snack, can I have a snack?”

“Purchase allowed, consumption forbidden.” He dropped a few credit chips into Jazz’s hand and

stepped back, watching Jazz expectantly. His slave was clearly unhappy with the arrangement, but his hand closed obediently over the money and he backed away. For some reason, he tapped two fingers against the edge of his visor and pointed them at Shockwave, in a vaguely threatening manner, then turned and flounced away.

A tiny huff escaped Shockwave. "So he is your bodyguard, as well as personal performer. Curious." He saw the way Soundwave looked at him and added, "I still have a controlling interest in most of the enterprises here in Iacon, Director Soundwave. I miss very little of what goes on in them. I wonder what Lord Megatron would think, if he could have seen that display by the dance floor."

"Of likely greater concern," Soundwave replied, not missing a beat, "what Lord Megatron now thinks of you."

Shockwave scowled. Not that it was visible on his lack of face, but the hunch of his shoulders and darkening optic made it obvious enough. "Shall we... retire to somewhere more comfortable? My little mixing venue here serves a well-cultivated high grade." He indicated a small two-story establishment at the edge of the street, well outside the price range of anything the surrounding mecha could afford.

"Preference, to remain on street."

"I would rather have some privacy."

"Shockwave, welcome to visit my office in Decepticon Headquarters during usual work shift."

Shockwave flinched at the mention of Headquarters, and hunched his shoulders again. "Very well. Will you at least sit with me?"

Soundwave spotted a small vendor's cart a few steps away, manned by a merchant selling canisters of tangy coolant. A smattering of tables and stools filled the space, all of them currently empty. "That venue, acceptable."

"I suppose." Shockwave followed Soundwave and seated himself gingerly on one of the rusted stools. The owner rushed to serve them drinks, which Shockwave took one look at and refused to touch. Patiently Soundwave settled himself, and waited.

"Director Soundwave," Shockwave managed, after some hesitation. "I -"

He stopped when Soundwave held up a hand, then snapped and pointed straight at Jazz. His slave thought he could get away with hovering behind another stall, just close enough to eavesdrop, but Soundwave knew Jazz too well for that. Authoritatively he gestured for Jazz to move further away, and when Jazz pouted at him he commanded the aerial twins to eject.

"*Objective,*" he ordered, "*occupy Jazz, keep him out of auditory range.*" The twins' curiosity and apprehension shot up at the sight of Shockwave, but they both clucked in the affirmative.

Soundwave waited until they had herded Jazz to a safer distance, then turned to Shockwave once more.

"Continue."

Shockwave looked slightly nonplussed, and cast a look back at Jazz that advertised clear disapproval, but at Soundwave's prompting he shifted his attention back to his purpose.

"I... have some concerns about the current state of the empire, and I find myself needing to share

them. Lord Megatron is, ah, still justly upset with my performance and will not receive me. I know that will end someday, but I do not think my concerns can wait until then.” He paused, as if expecting Soundwave to respond, but when Soundwave remained silent he continued. “I have, of course, noticed the increase in price at energon wholesale centers – as has everyone. If Lord Megatron felt it necessary to raise the price then I am sure it had to be done, for our Lord Megatron is never wrong. But, there are ways to introduce price changes in a manner that is not quite so noticeable to the general population. I fear some of the empire’s subjects will develop undue resentment for our lord.”

Again he stopped, watching and waiting, and this time Soundwave spoke. “Reason for relaying this?”

“Because, Director Soundwave, he listens to you still. I know we have had our differences -”

“Shockwave, attempted to subsume my department and status. Attempted to demolish my home.”

“Er, but I did not actually *do* any of those things.” Delicately Shockwave cleared his throat. “And remember, it is only because of me that you became such a successful officer in the Decepticon ranks. Where would you be now if I had not introduced you to Lord Megatron?”

Soundwave did not bother to give any answer to that but stony silence, and Shockwave tried another course. “Well, regardless of what’s happened between us since the war’s end, the fact remains that we two are Lord Megatron’s most loyal soldiers. We’ve always had more in common with each other than Commander *Starscream*, who spends all his time scheming how to take what’s not his.

He’s a lying, thieving traitor, and right now he is more dangerous than he’s ever been. His popularity is growing unchecked; you know this better than I do, I’m sure. The soaring price of energon has come to be associated with Lord Megatron’s rule, while Commander Starscream is seen as a hero to the commoners. If he were to openly rebel against Lord Megatron tomorrow, how many mecha would flock to his banner?”

“This prediction, extreme.”

“Perhaps now, but not forever. We know Starscream too well for that. Director Soundwave, I know that you are loyal to Lord Megatron; your loyalty is second only to mine. Rather than being at each other’s throat cables, we should unite to thwart Commander Starscream. We’re the only ones that can stop him!”

“Megatron, well aware of current political environment, and Starscream’s popularity. Megatron, capable of keeping Starscream in check.”

Shockwave clenched his claws in a brief show of frustration. “Director Soundwave, we both know that Lord Megatron’s temper tantrums do not last forever. My return to Decepticon Command *will* come, and when it does, I can be a powerful friend to you. You would do well to consider that.

Better to cast your lot with me than to trust that cyberviper of a Seeker to not stab you in the back. I am certain that I can make it... well worth your while.”

His clawed hand dropped off the edge of the small table and onto Soundwave’s knee, which immediately brought all of Soundwave’s thoughts to a very startled halt. Hundreds of vorns working beside Shockwave, and not once had he ever been propositioned by him. Soundwave had never even considered the possibility, knowing well that Shockwave loathed him and envied him his standing with Megatron. For the premier to make such a gesture now meant he was desperate indeed, not to mention well out of his depth. Shockwave possessed all the charm and good looks of a calculator. Even if the prospect of bedding him was not thoroughly distasteful, his clumsy execution of the offer was almost laughable. Shockwave was just about the least-suited mech on the

planet to make such an offer.

He was about to push Shockwave's hand off when Jazz burst out of the market crowds and launched himself at full sprint into Soundwave's lap, the twins in hot pursuit. Shockwave's hand was knocked off his knee and Shockwave flinched back, retreating to his own side of the table.

"Master," Jazz announced, loud and clear, "I've chosen my snack. Will you feed it to me now?"

His engine revved menacingly, while a hot blue glare pinned itself to Shockwave. Dumbfounded, Shockwave stared at them, and Soundwave let escape a tiny sigh.

*"Laserbeak. Buzzsaw."*

*"Slave, too fast,"* Buzzsaw complained, perching next to his sister on the back of an empty chair.

*"Permission for physical force, not given."*

That was true, and though Soundwave should have been angry at Jazz, he decided that his intervention had served as a useful tool for interrupting Shockwave's advances. He took the small candied energon treat that Jazz gave him and inserted it into his mouth. It was a matter-of-fact action as far as he was concerned, but Jazz closed his lips sensuously over Soundwave's fingertips, rolling a small noise of pleasure down his throat along with the candy, all the while shooting Shockwave snide looks of triumph.

Shockwave glowered. "Director Soundwave, your slave is unacceptably insolent. I cannot understand why you tolerate it. Were I his owner, I would have welded his mouth closed a long time ago."

"Ah, but Soundwave likes his partners to have a mouth," Jazz said maliciously, "or didn't you know?" Suggestively he licked his lips. "He enjoys the things I can do with it... but you wouldn't know anything about that. Because, you know, you don't have a mouth."

Shockwave's lone optic turned a shade that was nearly orange in both fury and embarrassment.

"Director Soundwave, I demand that you dismiss that obnoxious creature at once so we may continue our discussion."

"Shockwave, in no position to make demands," Soundwave reminded him calmly, absently stroking Jazz's helm. Shockwave may dismiss this slave as a mere irritation, but Soundwave knew better.

Again those mumbled words flashed through his memory: *tricked the three of them into hating each other, then they killed each other.*

Depressingly enough, Soundwave decided that he was going to have to help Shockwave after all.

Not for any promises of future friendship, which he knew would be conveniently forgotten, but because it was what had to be done to thwart Jazz. Soundwave would not allow him to use their feuding against them. The thought of helping Shockwave left a foul taste on his glossa, but as Shockwave himself said, the empire's future mattered more.

"Soundwave, willing to assist Shockwave," he spoke up, eliciting a surprised glance from Shockwave. On his lap, he felt Jazz stiffen. "Soundwave, often now tasked with work of your jurisdiction, and extra responsibilities not enjoyed. However, Megatron still determined in his anger, and not receptive to my opinions. If Shockwave desires return to Megatron's favor, advice: offer gift of apology."

"Such as?"

"Unknown. But recommend it difficult, expensive. Megatron, appreciative of subordinates'

sacrifices.”

“Is this the extent of your support?”

“More than Starscream likely to give,” he could not resist pointing out, which provoked an annoyed hiss. “Soundwave, willing to encourage Megatron’s forgiveness, but initial overture must be made by Shockwave.”

“Fine. I will take your ‘suggestion’ under consideration. Please also remember my offer, if it will result in any other helpful ideas. Good day, Director Soundwave.”

Shockwave stood and graced him with a haughty nod before marching away. “Finally!” Jazz gasped, and extended his open hand toward the twins. “Laserbeak, the salt!”

On cue, Laserbeak unspaced and dropped into Jazz’s palm a packet of Earthian minerals. With enthusiasm he ripped it open and scattered liberal handfuls of it around the table and on Shockwave’s empty seat. “Foul demon, be gone! Away, away, and cast not your evil shadow upon us again!”

“Jazz, Shockwave now gone. Display, unnecessary.”

“Call it extra insurance. *Some* of us remember what he’s like.” Gracefully Jazz swivelled off his lap and stood before him, fists planted on hips. “How could you even speak to him? Offer to help him? After everything he’s tried to do to you? He deserves his new home at the bottom of the Decepticon heap, and you should let him rot there.”

“Jazz’s advice, not requested in this matter.”

His words were a little curt and Jazz flinched, looking hurt. “Oh. I get it. He’s the next political bedfellow; you scratch his back and he’ll scratch wherever you want. Well don’t mind me - I’ll just go back to sleeping on the floor while you two are busy. Let me know when you’re done.”

“Jazz, jealous?”

“Jealous?” Jazz spluttered, piquing the interest of Soundwave and both aerials as well. “*Jealous?* Of that... ugly bucket of bolts? Of that sad sack poster child for Missing Optic Awareness? Shockwave couldn’t seduce his way out of a one-way sewage pipe, and he’d have the personality to match it. Take a good look at me, Soundwave. I am *Jazz*.” He lifted his chained hands over his head, turning a slow circle to show off his svelte build. “I am the hottest piece of real estate on the Ark, can have any bot that I choose, anytime, anywhere. My league is so far out of Shockwave’s that he couldn’t shoot to hit it - even if he could shoot. Shockwave wishes that I were jealous of a thing like him, but I’m *not* and never will be.”

Laserbeak muffled an amused chirp. Soundwave kept his expression as emotionless as ever, in contrast to his increasingly flustered and hot-tempered slave, whom he was not quite sure was upset about the prospect of Shockwave regaining support in Decepticon HQ or upset about Shockwave’s hand on his knee. Interesting.

“Naturally,” he agreed, when he realized Jazz was waiting rather defiantly for a response.

“However, it must be understood by all that no interfacing intended with Shockwave.”

“Really?” In spite of himself, Jazz’s posture relaxed. “Then why are you being so nice to him?”

“Reason already given: Soundwave, disinclined to carry governing responsibilities that should be Shockwave’s.” It was certainly, if not completely, the truth. “Now come, our walk still unfinished.” He stood, and grasped Jazz’s chin with a brief squeeze of affection. “Jazz, provides no end of

amusement.”

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Curiously, Rumble turned out to be exactly right in the end. Soundwave’s cross-referencing program ran its course, thoroughly scouring both history files from one end to the other, and came back with a result of zero possibilities for a meeting. That garishly painted neutral from the refinery was so young that he hadn’t even been sparked until well after the Autobots had been forced from Iacon. He’d barely been assigned a function before the *Ark* vacated the planet. The chances of Jazz and this young mech – this bothersome, *insignificant* young mech that had now wasted so much of Soundwave’s time – were so infinitely small that even his sophisticated program couldn’t calculate them. Jazz, for whatever reason, must have been mistaken.

Annoyed, Soundwave vented heavily and sat back in his chair. He closed out the first history file, but hesitated when his fingers moved to do the same for Jazz. Answering that question should have brought some relief, but Soundwave still felt uneasy. There was something... not right about this history file, which had begun to nag at him more insistently while the program did its work.

Something didn’t fit, like before, when he caught Jazz’s slip about the destruction of his club. If it was anything that obvious again, Soundwave couldn’t see it, but the uneasy feeling persisted anyway.

It was something Jazz did, he knew that much. Or just something he’d said, maybe. Whatever it was, he couldn’t remember the circumstances, only that it had troubled him and that it had something to do with this history file. Helplessly Soundwave scrolled through it again, though he’d long ago memorized it.

*[274v - 471v] First known location: Iacon. Pre-war era occupation, owner of local nightclub, designation Sparkbeat. Multiple citations of popularity within Iacon.*

Soundwave was head of Decepticon Intelligence. He’d gotten there not just because he was good at seeing what others had missed, but because he could see what wasn’t there at all. Whole stories could be found hiding between the lines of a boring paragraph, for those who paid attention. And right now, Soundwave was paying very close attention to the words on the screen. Something here was *important*.

*[472v] Sparkbeat destroyed in Decepticon attack on Iacon. Location of Jazz, unknown.*

His comm buzzed to life, blaring with the noise of angry twin voices hollering that he’d taken Jazz to the leisure district and not included them. Soundwave shut the transmission down without bothering to answer.

*[553v] Intruder captured in Decepticon camp; identity unconfirmed. Appearance matches Autobot Jazz. (Probability, 75%) Intruder escaped before interrogation could begin.*

These were not mistakes. He’d checked this file against independent sources, run every kind of crosscheck that he could think of back when investigating Jazz’s secret origins. So if everything here was the truth, then what was he looking for? What was the real story between the lines?

*[844v] Captured by gestalt team Combaticon, along with Autobot sniper Cliffjumper [deactivated]. Escaped before interrogation could begin.*

Without being aware of it, Soundwave leaned forward in his seat, gaze fixed on the screen.



*[845v] Attempted sabotage attempt on Decepticon headquarters, Cybertron. Minor explosions, no fatalities. Intruder escaped, suspected agent Jazz. (Probability 64%)*

That word kept coming back, over and over again: escaped, escaped, *escaped*. Again that night by the dance floor flashed through his mind, dark and hot and nearly deafening in its music. It wasn't so loud, though, that he hadn't heard Jazz say that one peculiar comment. One of the charms of being me, he'd said so easily, his voice light and carefree. I never get caught.

*[845v] Confirmed sighting, battle on Cybertron. Reported injured by Combaticon, designation Brawl, but successfully escaped with other Autobots.*

Primus.

Soundwave could feel his sparkbeat beginning to accelerate in his chest, generating more energy for the weapon protocols now demanding activation. His head whipped around to the monitor screens lining his office walls, where he could see Jazz back at home playing on his datapad. All those times he'd slithered out of captivity, always managing to get away just in time. Jazz never gets caught. The one time, the *only* time he'd been unlucky was the very last time. Or was it really unlucky?

Soundwave's hands flew across the console keys, pulling up all files on the last official battle of the war. He hadn't thought about this battle in years, and now that he was looking, the details of it were frustratingly vague. Starscream's report, as usual, gave an exhaustive account of his own genius, but his account of the Autobots' actions were sparse. An explosion in their bunker resulted in four corpses: Prowl, Ironhide, Wheeljack, and Cliffjumper. Then Skywarp had returned to his trine, dragging along with him a new Autobot prisoner in chains. The elusive spy Jazz, caught at last. After all those centuries of clever escapes, why did Jazz fail to get away the one time that it mattered the most?

*I never get caught.*

Soundwave watched Jazz on his monitor, still idly playing his game without an apparent care in the world. Was that a slave in his home, or an enemy? What was real and what was not? Did those Autobots in the bunker really die? Did Jazz wait for Skywarp that day? Distantly, Soundwave noticed that his hands had begun to tremble. The answers to those questions could change everything, including and most importantly whether this war was really over after all.

Panic brushed Soundwave's spark, but then his logic protocols kicked in. Why would Jazz ever allow himself to be captured on purpose? That was a bizarre plan even by Jazz's standards. If he had the ability to elude Skywarp that day, surely it made more sense to remain free. He could have bided his time, returned to Cybertron in secret, and begun his work to free the Autobot slaves without the hindrance of chains and a collar. Why subject himself to the constraints of slavery, not to mention the humiliation and pain, if he had a choice? And as for those other Autobots, the Seekers had brought back what remained of their blackened and fragmented frames. Identification had been verified by Hook. And even if it were possible to fool the medic, the war had now been done for six years. Why hadn't they done anything? They would not just vanish and leave their fellow Autobots to languish in slavery.

No, they had not been heard from because they were dead, and that Autobot in his home was a slave, not enemy. Hook had even double checked his collar and slave coding. Relieved, Soundwave talked himself out of his agitated state and felt the weapon protocols go dormant, his sparkbeat even and slow. Rumble actually was right, this obsessive rereading of Jazz's history file had only led him into a circle of paranoia. Time to turn it off, and go home to take his slave on a walk.

Soundwave stood up, and did exactly that.

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## on dissent

These orns, it was not unusual for Soundwave to return to his home and find the entertainment console blaring with music, usually human-made, often nonsensical, and always loud. It was, however, a surprise not to see Jazz parked on the floor beside it, or for that matter, anywhere in the common room at all. Soundwave crossed the space to his open berthroom door, pausing just outside the frame, and looked inside. Jazz was lounging on the berth, humming along, Laserbeak perched on one knee with her wings outstretched. He was brushing her wings again, his long smooth strokes sweeping through the platelets with an expert's touch. He'd learned this chore well, since coming to live here. Laserbeak was clearly enjoying herself, optics shuttered to only slits, cooing whenever Jazz's fingertips stroked underneath her sensitive wing joint. That was just the way she liked it, but the sensitivity of those wings was also her greatest vulnerability. In battle, the sight of an enemy's hands that close and in position to do so much damage would be enough to trigger Soundwave's first available weapon, shots fired first and then his own body closing the distance right after so he could finish what his sonic cannon didn't.

Again Jazz's fingers glided over the fragile joint and Soundwave clenched his fists, smothering his weapon's attempts to activate. Laserbeak finally noticed his presence, through a haze of gratuitous pleasure, and chirped a greeting. Surprised, Jazz looked up and smiled.

"Evening, my love. How long have you been spying on us there?"

Soundwave ignored the question, extending one arm towards his cassetticon. "Laserbeak, come."

The order surprised and dismayed her, and she blinked at him with a quizzical look. Jazz looked much the same.

"But we're in the middle of -"

"Now," Soundwave repeated, his tone blank as ever but pressing the symbiotic link with more urgency. He felt the shadow of confusion over Laserbeak's thoughts, knowing she could feel his distress but could not understand the reason for it. Still, an order had been given and Laserbeak was as obedient as any other of his possessions. Reluctantly she shook out her wings and launched off Jazz's leg, flapping across the short distance to Soundwave. He opened his chest and she transformed; only when she was safely docked inside him did the tension in his spark ease, and he could allow his weapon protocols to go dormant.

Jazz still looked confused, but when Soundwave's gaze fell back on him he masked it quickly with a teasing grin. "Jealous, lover? You needn't be. It's a strictly platonic wing-brushing, I swear."

Laserbeak felt rather differently about it, not that Soundwave saw any need to explain that to Jazz.

Instead he moved closer, conscious of the apprehensive flash across Jazz's visor but not particularly reassured by it. He did hate this anxiety, and what it was doing to him. He'd already convinced himself once that this creature in his berth was just a slave, nothing more, and he'd done so with tidy logical arguments that left no room for debate. His protective carrier instincts were, apparently, harder to convince.

"Soundwave?" Jazz tried, a little more uneasy now, and still got no response. Slowly, without any sudden moves, Soundwave crawled onto both Jazz and his berth, bringing all his bulk to bear as Jazz was forced to lie back. Hands found their way to Jazz's wrists, pinning them to the surface of the berth. His helm tipped to rest against Jazz's, whose exhalations kept getting faster and lighter as his nervousness grew.

They'd been here before. Memories rushed through Soundwave, bringing back the day that he'd pinned Jazz just like this, before invading his mind to find the truth. He could do it all over again, right now. He could tear through that head to find what really happened, and never mind the damage he did along the way. If he wanted to try, there was nothing Jazz could do to stop him.

Jazz must have been remembering the same day. His voice was a small whisper, trembling against the plating on Soundwave's face, when he asked, "What do you want to know?"

He asked. Soundwave shuttered his optics and thought of that night in the leisure district, dark and hot and vibrating with relentless music, spinning through Jazz's memories. He'd invited him, that night, offering his mind with full trust and willingness. The mere invitation thrummed almost as pleasantly in his spark as the actual exploration. Would it ever happen again if he did this to Jazz now?

The truth, Soundwave already knew, would be tangled up in incomprehensible music anyway.

Broken trust and hurt betrayal were the only things he'd find tonight, if Soundwave were to rape this mind again. So he would not do it. Oddly relieved to find himself coming to this conclusion, Soundwave exhaled and relaxed his grip.

"Undecided," he murmured, in answer to Jazz's question. "So much to choose from."

He retracted his mask and kissed Jazz, not quite forcefully but not gently either. Now completely at a loss, Jazz responded gingerly, his half of the kiss full of hesitation and uncertainty. Soundwave could feel the tension in his struts, and hear his vents working extra hard to keep up with his systems now that Soundwave had him sandwiched between the berth and his own body. Soundwave flexed and pushed away, rolling over onto his back and neatly reversing their positions. Immediately he felt Jazz's relief, his body relaxing onto Soundwave's frame with a tiny sigh. The kiss was renewed, more enthusiastically this time, Jazz's glossa pushing more confidently into his own mouth.

Soundwave could feel the light revs of his engine, and his pede sliding invitingly up and down alongside the armor of his right leg. Their kiss dwindled to a close, and Jazz moved his lips downward, tracing the sensitive wires in his neck and then over the edge of his chest armor.

Fingertips ghosted the edge of his chest glass, one of his favorite sensations, and Soundwave basked in the pleasure of it. In the long term, he still had no intention of letting Jazz control all their berth activities. For now, however, he was content to let Jazz do as he liked. His slave had been so delightfully *attentive* since that incident in the market with Shockwave.

Jazz was moving on past the glass now. Soundwave had overheard enough snide remarks from other Decepticons to know that most mecha assumed his torso buttons were a phenomenal source of erotic pleasure, which was of course ridiculous. Soundwave's buttons were built in to his frame as access to many primary functions, and their use triggered nothing but an urge to, well, work. But to tease and tickle the seams around each button edge, as Jazz was doing right now... that was a different case altogether. Soundwave kept silent, but arched his hips further up off the berth to indicate his approval. Soundwave was always silent in the berth, but he'd learned Jazz was exactly the opposite. Loud breathy exhalations, moans, whimpers, and soft groans were all frequently uttered, including right now. Jazz was as incapable of remaining quiet in the berth as he was in the rest of his life. That thought amused Soundwave and he caressed Jazz's face with his hand, idly stroking his cheek plating with one finger. Jazz snatched it between his denta and closed his lips over the finger, glossa swirling sensuously around the tip and causing shivers to crawl right up Soundwave's arm and into his spark. He licked it and suckled it -

*Licking and suckling Megatron's finger like a perfectly trained slave, never dropping his optics, meeting Megatron stare for stare in the center of the Command Room while every watching Decepticon snickered. His shoulders were slumped in submission and only Soundwave saw the*

*vicious glint of undefeated hatred in his visor. Such an actor, his clever little slave, always playing a part, playing his game, playing him -*

Soundwave yanked his hand away from Jazz like he'd been burned, his spark thudding in his chest. Jazz flinched, startled and maybe even hurt by the sudden withdrawal. He sat up straight, his visor blank and bewildered. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He was still straddling Soundwave's hips in this position, so small and harmless. Right? Or acting it?

"Soundwave?"

"Cycle progressing." Somehow he managed to kick his vocalizer into working, even with the rest of his mind scrambled by doubt. "Time for your walk, overdue; your exercise necessary. Fetch chains."

It was at least a truth, if not the truth, but Jazz looked completely unconvinced. His behavior was too erratic, the stop in their activities too abrupt, for Jazz not to be suspicious. "But--"

"Cycle progressing," he repeated, a sharper edge in his voice. "My order given. Reasons for delay, nonexistent."

This time he definitely saw hurt flash through Jazz's visor, not the physical kind. Now reminded of his place, he slid off Soundwave and the berth and bowed gracefully. "Yes, master. Right away."

Now the walk was probably doomed to be an unpleasant one, which was just one more frustration for Soundwave. This new reason to distrust Jazz was throwing complications into Soundwave's progress in training him to accept and be comfortable in his role as Soundwave's possession. Jazz must be so confused. It would be better for both their peace of minds if Soundwave just dispensed with the paranoia entirely.

If only he didn't know how good Jazz was at pretending.

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Soundwave was being shadowed. By his own symbiont, no less. All the way to Decepticon Command he could feel the familiar brush of Ravage's presence against his own spark, his otherwise invisible spy tailing him at just enough distance that no one else would have ever noticed. He landed in front of headquarters, entered the building, and made his way to his own office, not once looking over his shoulder. Upon entering his office he left the door open, an invitation, and proceeded to boot up his console.

*"Your concern?"*

A bit of a pout drifted across the link, since Ravage had considerable pride in his own surveillance abilities. Sulkily he slunk inside the office and sat up straight, tail coiling around his body.

Underneath that minor irritation, though, Soundwave could feel him radiating confusion and apprehension. His odd behavior around Jazz had not gone unnoticed, and Ravage was at a loss to understand it. Unsurprisingly, he wanted explanation.

*“Explanation, not available at this time,”* Soundwave answered, to Ravage’s immediate and highly displeased consternation. He did not look at Ravage as he accessed the necessary report, downloading it into a blank datapad. *“Assessment of circumstances, still under consideration.”*

Exasperated, Ravage demanded to know *what* circumstances, and Soundwave ignored him.

Download complete, he collected the datapad and left his office again. He nearly tripped over Ravage, slithering in and out between his legs as he walked, his most obnoxious method of pestering Soundwave whenever he really wanted something. His frustration was palpable. A slew of images cascaded through his thoughts, including the mounting stress of Soundwave’s work for the empire, the tension of recent politics, and the perplexing realization that the Autobot slave did not seem to generate as much comfort and distraction for his master as he had in the past. If anything, Jazz’s proximity was generating more distress in Soundwave, and if Soundwave had grown tired of Jazz then wouldn’t it just be better to get rid of the slave for good -

“Soundwave!” Megatron hailed, before Ravage could really work himself into a rant. “There you are. Punctual, as always.”

His leader approached, and immediately Ravage froze, all his thoughts turning to focus on Megatron’s closing presence. His armor clamped down, his struts stiffened into a warning, protective stance before Soundwave, fangs half-bared in a silent hiss. Ravage had not forgiven Megatron for what happened to Soundwave the day of the riots, in spite of Soundwave’s many lectures that he must.

Fortunately, Megatron didn’t even look down. “Shall we get on with it, then? My ‘untamed’ pet is in a mood today, and I have no intention of wasting much time down here. More attractive leisure time awaits.”

Soundwave bowed in respectful greeting. “Understood, Lord Megatron.” To Ravage alone, he added, *“You have duties elsewhere.”*

Ravage was still glowering at Megatron. In him Soundwave sensed an urge to disobey, stronger than Soundwave had felt in him for a long time. Memories flashed through his mind of that discipline session out in the unrepaired sectors, when Jazz was witness to the last time Soundwave had to remind Ravage of his place. Casually Soundwave allowed a few of those images to filter into Ravage’s end of the link, and got a small flinch in response.

*“Go. Now.”*

This time Ravage ducked his head in unhappy obedience. Flashing one last dark look in Megatron’s direction, he turned and loped away with his easy feline grace. Megatron didn’t seem to have noticed any of the exchange, his hand already pushing open the door by which they’d met. Quickly Soundwave fell in behind him, following him into the unmarked room. Standing in the center of it was the reason for this trip to Headquarters in the first place, a large green triplechanger shuffling his pedes and looking worried. He had good reason to be. Soundwave’s cameras had caught him on multiple occasions complaining, loudly, over the raised prices of energon. Mere complaints only merited extra surveillance, not an arrest, but then the mech made another trip to the wholesale fuel center and apparently snapped. When told the newest price per cube, he exploded and started bellowing furiously at the Decepticon staff, screaming obscenities about the empire and its crimes against the planet. Ravage, who’d been tailing him, immediately contacted Soundwave who recommended arrest to the Enforcement Division.

The bluster and righteous anger were all gone now. He fidgeted uncomfortably as he waited, rubbing cuffed hands against one another and looking very much like he’d rather be anywhere but here. His optics had gone pale with nervousness, but when he saw Megatron enter the room, they lit

up with a bright flash of blue.

“My Lord Megatron!” he gasped, and rushed forward all of a step before two guards blocked his way. “Thank Primus you’ve come! Now I know I’ll be saved.”

Megatron raised an optic ridge at his beaming expression. “Is that so? Your confidence is impressive...” He accepted the datapad Soundwave offered him, and spared a quick glance at the screen. “.... Springer, is it?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Do you know why you’re here, Springer?”

The smile faded, and some of the wariness returned to his optics. “I, uh, maybe said a few things I shouldn’t have. When I was at the fuel center, before.” He darted a quick, resentful look at the silent Soundwave, as if it were Soundwave’s fault.

“And what exactly did you say, that you shouldn’t have?”

“Don’t remember,” Springer mumbled.

“You fragging Cons just can’t take enough from us,” Megatron read from Soundwave’s report.

“Don’t you know we got nothing left to steal? Mechs starving in the streets and all you fuel-grubbing thieves can think about is sucking every last credit out of this city for that watered-down slag you try to call energon. Go sit in a smelter, you prissy stuck-up rejects from a drone factory.”

He lifted his gaze from the pad. “What a pity you couldn’t remember all that. It’s a remarkable string of insults.”

More color drained from Springer’s optics. “I only meant the prices, how jacked up they got, not that you’re really thieves – I mean, not *you* of course, just Decepticons. Not them either, I mean! I am completely loyal -”

Irritably Megatron waved a hand for him to shut up. “You’re not happy with the current price of energon.”

“No. My lord. It’s made it real hard to keep my crew going.”

“Crew?” Again he glanced at the file. “Ah. You run a small demolition and renovation business in the ghettos. Heavy lifting, building destruction, and junk removal, just to name a few of your services. You call yourselves ‘The Wreckers’.”

The mech Springer looked slightly taken aback, but nodded. “That’s right. We’re not a shiny operation, but we work real hard.”

“So I see. You’ve even been arrested in the past for working without an empire-granted permit.”

“It was expensive!” Springer blurted out, then cringed at the look on Megatron’s face. “But, we paid the fine after my arrest. We got the fra- we got the permit too.”

“You don’t look very happy about it. Do you find obedience to my empire bothersome?”

“No, I just thought- well, mechs say permits don’t matter so much... lately.”

“It’s what *I* say that matters,” Megatron reminded him sharply. “You’ll do well to remember that.”

“Yes, Lord Megatron.”

Silence descended in the room again, while Megatron scrolled down to Soundwave’s final notes. Ravage’s recordings had missed nothing. Soundwave saw the hand holding the datapad tighten, and his optics narrow.

“You are a green mech, Springer.”

“...yeah?”

“So why is it that you have red paint in your home?”

“Huh?” Springer’s growing apprehension gave way to total bewilderment. “What’s the matter with red paint?” A dangerous gleam kindled in Megatron’s optics and Springer was quick to lose interest in his own question, fumbling to answer Megatron’s instead. “I mean, that red paint’s not mine, it’s a friend’s. We touch up each other’s paint, sometimes.”

“Of course you do.” Megatron’s voice was flat and hard, and Springer rightly took that as reason to be concerned.

“You can ask him, if you want. His name is - ”

“Silence,” Megatron snapped, and Springer clamped his mouth shut. “Do you know what I think, Springer?” Springer did not, and he shook his head. “I think you’re a criminal. You’re a dangerous and subversive element in my empire, and I don’t want you in it any longer. I find you guilty of dissent, and sentence you to hard labor in the Earth fuel camps.”

Springer gaped, looking more horrified with every word that came out of Megatron’s mouth, and the last sentence put him close to panic. “Wha- the alien colony? With the slaves? But I’m not an Autobot!”

“Really?” Megatron glanced at his blank chest armor and shrugged. “It’s not easy to tell, these days.”

“No!” Springer gave in to his panic and launched himself forward, whether to attack Megatron or throw himself at his pedes was not clear. One guard shouldered him hard in the mid-torso seam, causing him to double over and gasp, and the other struck him hard behind the knee joints. He collapsed to the ground with a stifled cry of pain, optics fixed on the indifferent Megatron.

“Please,” Springer begged. “My lord! Please show mercy, I am loyal to you! You are the savior of our planet!”

“Something you should have remembered before protesting the few credits I asked in exchange for fuel,” Megatron reminded him tersely, then gestured to his guards. “Lock him back up. He’ll be transferred to Earth with the next space bridge activation.”

“But my crew – please don’t do this! Lord Megatron, please -” He kept begging for as long as it took his escort to drag him out of the room, and only the door banging shut behind them brought relief. Megatron grunted and stretched, tossing the surveillance report into a disposal bin with perfect accuracy.

“Well, that didn’t take long after all. Good work, Soundwave.”

Soundwave barely heard the compliment, still surprised and uneasy at the sentence Megatron had so unexpectedly dispensed. “Lord Megatron, this decision unusual. Earth prison camp exclusively for



Autobots. Inclusion of civilian prisoner unprecedented and may not -”

Megatron waved him quiet, already on his way out of the room. Soundwave had to hurry to keep up. “What’s the difference, really? Autobots protested me during the war; this civilian protests me now, it all comes to the same thing. Soundwave, don’t you see? Why lock up a whining peasant and let him waste away in a prison cell, doing nothing, when he could be contributing to Cybertron’s prosperity? We need more production on Earth. There are too few Autobot slaves, so we’ll add more – one way or the other.” He fixed Soundwave with a careful look. “Unless you’d rather volunteer your own.”

Quickly Soundwave lowered his gaze. “That option, not preferred.”

“Then I don’t see a problem. Dismissed, Soundwave.” His long strides carried him onward while Soundwave slowed to a stop, wishing he knew how to label this unease churning in his spark. Earth production did need help, that much was fact, but Soundwave didn’t like it. It didn’t seem a good idea to add to the Autobot numbers...

In the corner of his vision, he glimpsed a flash of violet wings and turned his head. Skywarp was just passing through that side corridor, and unusually enough was alone. Without even thinking about it, Soundwave turned and closed the distance to him with long quick strides.

“Skywarp, your attention requested.”

Skywarp threw one look over his shoulder, scowled, and failed to stop moving. “What do *you* want?”

“Some study recently conducted on final battle of war. Details require elucidation.”

“Eluci-what now?”

“Report indicates you dove and assaulted Jazz, 16.3 mechanometers from defending Autobot bunker. Why Jazz not within bunker? Jazz trying to escape it? Or return to it?”

“How should I know?” Skywarp asked crossly. “Why don’t you ask him?”

Soundwave circled in front of Skywarp and stopped moving, blocking his path. “Your answers, preferable. Which direction Jazz moving at time of visual contact?”

“I don’t *know*. I don’t remember.”

“Jazz, easily seen from your position?”

“Well I found him, didn’t I?”

Soundwave tried another track. “Jazz’s expression, surprised when you attacked?”

“Pit if I’d know. I was paying attention to the gun in his hand, not his face.”

“His shots, unsuccessful?”

“Course. I’m fast, or haven’t you seen me in action?”

“Jazz, surprised by consequent explosion in bunker? Showed concern? Vocalized any -”

“Soundwave,” Skywarp broke in impatiently, “you’re boring me with all this history. It was a long time ago, and it doesn’t matter. We won, remember? And you’re the fragger that got Jazz in the

end, so relax and enjoy it already, if you know how.”

He graced Soundwave with an undeserved look of contempt, slid around him, and kept walking.

Frustrated and disappointed, Soundwave huffed through his vents. What he really wanted was to stop wasting words and just go straight into Skywarp’s memories, so he could see everything for himself. That was a political impossibility without Starscream’s approval, though, and Soundwave had no intention of drawing his curiosity to Jazz by even trying to ask.

Another thought struck him, just as Skywarp had reached the end of this corridor. He raised his voice just loud enough to be heard. “Skywarp. Jazz, ever attempted to sneak away from your home without permission?”

“What?” Skywarp turned to walk backward for a few steps, and uttered a scornful bark of laughter. “Frag no. I’d have kicked his aft if he tried something like that.”

But only if he'd even noticed. The unease that had been lurking in Soundwave’s spark dropped now into his fuel tank, feeling strangely like dread, and a call to panic that only he could hear.

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The market seemed noisier than ever today, which was just as well, since Soundwave and Jazz were walking in total silence. Jazz hated it, he knew, and had spent most of their walks the previous two cycles needling at Soundwave with his usual arsenal of quips. What he wanted was to flush out the reason for Soundwave's shifting moods, but Soundwave kept his replies short or nonexistent, leaving Jazz without clues and all the more frustrated. By now he'd run out, and had to settle for covertly staring at Soundwave out of the corner of his visor. Laserbeak floated somewhere above their heads, just as perplexed as his slave. Soundwave ignored both of them and gestured to a merchant fluttering hopefully around Jazz.

"Jazz, in need of new game?"

"Not really; haven't been playing much. I find myself... distracted lately. I imagine you do too."

"Services, not required," Soundwave informed the ragged vendor coolly, without looking at Jazz. The vendor bowed and fled as fast as he could.

*"This atmosphere, uncomfortable,"* Laserbeak complained.

*"Laserbeak, welcome to depart."*

*"Preference, to remain. Inclination is not to leave master and slave alone right now."*

Soundwave stopped moving at that and looked right up at Laserbeak, now perched on a crosspole and looking a little too solemn for her own good.

*"State predicted incident."*

*"Unknown. Merely following inclination at this time."*

She fluffed her wing platelets and looked away from him, at Jazz, who was pretending not to stare at him again. The three of them might have hovered there in awkward silence forever if a cluster of

mecha hadn't pushed their way between them, too wrapped up in their gossip to notice they'd nearly jostled aside a Decepticon.

"- have gone out of business too, they couldn't keep up."

"At this rate, only the biggest and richest factories will be able to afford fuel." "So much for 'mech of the commoners', eh?"

"Only Lord Starscream still speaks for us. If he just had more control over the..."

The words shocked Soundwave no more so than the careless, brazen manner in which they were spoken, out in the middle of the active cycle on the streets - and heard through his own audios, no less, not even through the recordings of his own symbiotes. It was sedition, pure and simple.

Soundwave heard it, Laserbeak heard it, and worst of all Soundwave knew Jazz had heard it too.

There was no way he could not, and sure enough Jazz's spine had stiffened with sudden interest, head turning to follow the chatting mecha. "Did you hear -"

"Never mind." Soundwave locked a hard grip on Jazz's arm and moved quickly onward, resolutely plowing down the street in spite of Jazz's protesting tugs.

"But I heard -"

"Irrelevant."

"It's *not* irrelevant, they said -"

"Jazz will concentrate on walk," Soundwave snapped. "That is task of slave, nothing more."

"But- stop dragging me, it hurts - *let me go!*"

Jazz dug in his heels and gave a hard yank, finally freeing himself. He backed a step away from Soundwave, arm held to his chest, his expression a cross between bewildered and hurt. Soundwave did his best to ignore it, looming large to block his way if he tried to bolt back the way they'd come.

The dissenters would be tagged by Laserbeak and dealt with later, but right now his biggest concern was this Autobot. Jazz was hunting for weaknesses in the empire to exploit, and Soundwave would not allow him this chance.

"Soundwave," Jazz started, then hesitated. He looked so confused. "I... don't know what you -"

That was as far as he got before a blue blur torpedoed out of the cross alley and crashed into Jazz at high velocity, knocking both him and itself to the ground. Jazz cried out in pain, taken completely by surprise, and carrier instincts snapped to life. In one long stride he reached the scrawny blue mech responsible for Jazz's pain, closed a crushing grip around his neck, and lifted him straight up into the air.

"Attack on my property, will not be tolerated," he announced, voice cold as death, cannon protocols already in motion. The mech squealed in panic, pedes pumping through the empty air at a surprising speed, not that it would do him any good to be fast now. His carelessness had damaged Jazz, and Soundwave was in no mood to show mercy.

"Soundwave, I'm okay." Still sprawled on the walkway, Jazz reached to touch his shin armor. "It was an accident. Let the poor kid live, please?"

Jazz was in no place to demand his treatment of the neutral, but he could ask. In disgust Soundwave threw the mech aside and turned his full attention to Jazz, scooping him up off the ground and sitting

him on the nearest supply crate. His armor was badly scraped and scuffed all down the right side of his torso, and rapidly Soundwave started examining him for deeper injuries.

“Jazz, state condition. Impact painful? Damage, great?”

“*Baka,*” Jazz scoffed, but his voice was soft and affectionate. “*Stupid. It’s just a fender-bender. You worry too much.*”

He could say that, but Soundwave knew that the sheer surprise of the collision, if nothing else, had shaken him a little. His fingers trembled slightly when he tried to push away Soundwave’s prodding, and it probably wasn’t an accident that they somehow wound up entwining themselves with Soundwave’s fingers instead. For just a moment all that tension between them vanished, and there was only the small smile on Jazz’s face. Irritatingly enough, the moment was broken by the blue mech clearing his vocalizer.

“Uh, I’m really super sorry about that, sir, he’s right that it was an accident I didn’t mean to crash into him or anyone at all for that matter - my friends are always telling me not to run so fast in the city but I’m supposed to deliver all these before the end of the cycle and I’ll get in so much trouble if I don’t he picked me because I’m fast right (?) so how can I do my job right and not run fast -”

“Apology stated,” Soundwave interrupted tersely. “Civilian, now dismissed.”

“Oh, nononono sorry sir but I can’t leave yet sir. You’re Soundwave right sir? The mech that records everyone?”

Beside him, Jazz stifled an amused snort. Not at all pleased with the disrespectful address, Soundwave answered coldly, “Affirmative.”

“Then that means this is for you sir!” Hastily he plucked something out of his subspace, fumbling a little and nearly dropping it in his extreme hurry to give it to Soundwave. Jazz, though, somehow managed to snatch it out of his hands before Soundwave could take it, the little sneak.

“What do we have here? ‘Grand Premier Shockwave, governour of Cybertron, requests the honour of your presence at his grand fete -’ wait, what?” The light behind Jazz’s visor flared white with disbelief. “Is this some kind of joke? The most hated mech on the planet is about to throw a *party*? Like, where mecha are supposed to have *fun*?”

The courier shuffled nervously. One pede was tapping against the ground and had been ever since he stood up, a clear signal he wanted to get back to the running he’d been built for. “Sorry Autobot he just hired me to deliver the invitations I don’t really know what Premier Shockwave is planning and -”

“Objective accomplished,” Soundwave pointed out. “Invitation delivered; now dismissed.”

“Yes sir thank you sir!” Like a launched missile he sprang away and pelted down the street, going if anything even faster than when he’d first crashed into Jazz. Soundwave was nearly tempted to roll his optics, but Jazz demanded more of his attention. He’d slid off his perch and was sauntering closer to the edge of the walkway, toying with the metallic plaque in his hands.

“Well, look who wants to be one of the cool kids again,” he drawled. “Love the gold finish, Shockwave, very classy. It’d be a shame if I... dropped it into the sewers!” He extended his hand over an open grate and let it fall, but Soundwave was close enough to rescue it in time. Annoyed, Jazz huffed loudly. “You’re not actually going to play along with this pathetic grasp at popularity, are you?”

“Shockwave, clearly trying to follow my advice,” Soundwave said by way of answer. For the first time he got a close look at what Jazz had tried to destroy, and had to be a little impressed with the premier’s efforts. An invitation to a gathering could, and usually was, delivered via electronic message. Instead, Shockwave had prepared an elaborate metal engraving, shimmering with a patina of what looked like real Earth gold. Laser-etched into its surface were the elegant curves of traditional Cybertronian glyphs, evoking a dialect not heard since before the revolution. Grandly, Shockwave promised not only a ‘fete’ to honor all Decepticon officers and soldiers, but to open his estate to any mech ‘of property’ who wished to attend. Ghetto dwellers and beggars were not included, but that still meant hundreds of Iaconians would be eligible to come.

“Arranging lavish gathering with free fuel for general population,” Soundwave explained.

“Attempting to duplicate success of midvorn festival, but at personal expense. This, his gesture of apology to Lord Megatron.”

A familiar jealous scowl flashed across Jazz’s face. “So you’re going, I suppose.”

“Affirmative.”

“Well consider yourself warned,” Jazz said haughtily, “it will be the *opposite* of fun. At least I’ll get a chance to see the other Autobots out of it.”

“Perhaps not. Your presence, unnecessary.”

“What?” Jazz’s head snapped up to face him, his expression shocked and dismayed. “You won’t take me? Why?”

“As stated, your presence unnecessary.”

Soundwave noted his immediate distress, but he hadn’t forgotten his security concerns over Jazz.

He’d cut off his access to the other slaves for good reason. Frustration flitted across that visor, but then Jazz worked up a hopeful smile.

“But Stepmother, I want to go to the ball too!”

What? Soundwave floundered on that one, until Laserbeak furnished him with a helpful data burst.

“*Earth reference*,” she explained, amused.

“I mean,” Jazz added, “it’s not as if I ever get to see my friends lately. It’s been such a long time.”

The smile turned sad and he turned back to his seat on the crate, his limp suddenly more pronounced. “It’s pitiful that something like this is our only chance to be around each other, isn’t it?

But we’ll take what we can get. And I worry about them. Autobots usually wind up being the entertainment at these sorts of things, and not in the good way. I wish they didn’t have to face it alone, without me there to at least help.”

Shoulders slumped, Jazz stared at the ground in perfectly manufactured melancholy. Soundwave wasn’t buying, but Laserbeak fretted and nudged his end of the link with a hopeful smile of her own.

*“Jazz’s attendance, so terrible? His reaction if left behind, probably unpleasant and defiant. His happiness if brought, immeasurable. Master, keen to provide Jazz with happiness if possible.”*

She didn’t know about his latest reasons to worry, but she was right that Jazz was almost certain to lash out if left behind. Even if Soundwave left Buzzsaw to watch him, Jazz would find some way to make sure Soundwave came home to a polish-smear common room, or worse.

Also, he really did look pitiful.

"Your behavior," he finally said, "will be impeccable."

Jazz's face lit up with a brilliant smile, a look echoed by the surge of relief from Laserbeak. "As always!"

Soundwave closed the distance between them and bent forward, visor to visor with Jazz.

"*Better* than always," he corrected.

"The best," Jazz promised, executing some crossing motion with his hand. "I swear it. On the Matrix."

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"Yes, I read the report," Megatron assured him. Languidly he turned a fraction of a circle, turning slightly away from Soundwave while Bluestreak knelt at his pedes with cloth and polish.

"Ungrateful little parasites. We'll have them arrested, of course. They can go to Earth too. Let them help with energon production, since they're so *concerned* about its availability."

Soundwave nodded, keeping silent this time about his misgivings. Megatron was no fool, and Soundwave knew he wouldn't miss a chance to not only add to the slave population, but quietly remove a few of Starcream's supporters from Iacon at the same time. It was well played, but Soundwave wondered what Starcream's reaction would be when he found out.

"Perhaps upcoming celebration," he ventured, "hosted by Shockwave, will ease tensions in general populace."

"Oh, that." Megatron rolled his optics and gestured vaguely at a table by the wall, heaped with old datapads and a half-empty cube of energon. The gold invitation could just barely be seen, half-buried by the pile. "I got his 'note'. He certainly poured his spark into that, didn't he? Pathetic. I don't see much point in bothering to go."

Not an encouraging reaction. Soundwave had promised Shockwave to assist him in his reconciliation with Megatron, though, and he'd come here to his private residence to do exactly that.

"Your reluctance, understood. However, your attendance recommended. Celebration in honor of Decepticons useless without Lord of Decepticons present."

"Well, this is a surprise." Megatron shot him a baffled look over his shoulder. "I didn't expect you to speak up for Shockwave, of all mechs. There's been considerable, ah, friction between you two for some time now."

"Affirmative. However, with economy struggling and civilians unhappy, unity and cooperation more important than personal grudges. My support for Shockwave, given for that reason." All true enough, even if Soundwave wasn't including his real reason, and Megatron's look of surprise faded into pleased approval.

"Now that is what I like to hear: Decepticons putting aside their petty problems for the good of the empire. You set a fine example, Soundwave. I... *suppose* it's about time I forgave him anyway. It's true he turned a colossal failure out of that business with the lawkeepers, but I'm also sure it's true that he's miserable without his precious work. Fine, I'll attend." He waved a negligent hand in

Soundwave's direction. "And I'll expect to see you there too. Perhaps a bit of fun is what we all need, right now."

His hand dropped to Bluestreak, cupping the curve of his helm and sweeping lower around the edge of his face. Bluestreak trembled, hand clenching around the cloth briefly before he forced himself to continue his task. "You're dismissed, Soundwave."

Soundwave bowed and turned to go, but then Megatron unexpectedly spoke up again. "No, wait, there was something else I wanted to ask you. I believe you were there at the refinery that day; do you remember that young mech I met? The one with fire all over his paintjob?"

Soundwave froze and immediately forced himself to relax, hoping Megatron had not noticed. "Affirmative," he agreed cautiously. "Soundwave present at that time."

"What's his name?"

Wishing he didn't have to, Soundwave answered him. "Designation: Hot Rod."

Megatron snorted again, amused. "The younger generation does tend to favor silly names, don't they? Still, I'd say it suits him." It didn't seem to occur to Megatron to wonder why Soundwave so readily knew the name, or if it did, he didn't say anything. Instead he looked thoughtful, gazing out over the city's horizon. "Hot Rod, Hot Rod. Have I... met him, somewhere?"

For the second time in less than a klik, Soundwave froze. "Repeat?" he said uselessly, too shocked to say anything more intelligent. Megatron grinned, looking almost abashed.

"It's an odd question, I know. He's hardly more than a newspark, and that's not a forgettable color scheme. But the moment he looked up and I saw his optics, that day, I had the strangest feeling that I'd met him somewhere before. No, not just met him, but that I *know* him. That I have known him for a very long time."

There was such a strange, distant look in Megatron's optics, not quite like anything Soundwave had ever seen there before. Eventually he noticed Soundwave again, and the peculiar look vanished with a shrug and a smirk. "Well, I will know him if I have anything to say about it, and I do. I plan on summoning him to my berth."

Soundwave just stared, mind still spinning. The same distant look, nearly the same words, from both Jazz and Megatron now - and this when he'd been none too comfortable with it the first time around. It was too strange, too suspicious; there was some kind of anomaly surrounding that young mech and it didn't matter anymore that Soundwave could not guess what. Every instinct that fed into every neural function that had made him head of Decepticon Espionage and Intelligence was now clamoring to eliminate this anomaly because something was *just not right*.

"Lord Megatron," he spoke up, when he could not bear to hold back any longer. "My recommendation, arrest this mech."

"What?" Megatron threw him a startled look. "Why? Is he guilty of dissent?"

"...Negative," Soundwave had to admit, reluctantly.

"Then, why?"

Yes, why? Even his only reason was hardly a reason at all, if Soundwave were willing to give it to Megatron, which he was not. He scrambled to concoct some kind of answer that made sense, but before he could, Megatron burst unexpectedly into laughter.

“Soundwave, are you jealous? You, of all mechs? I expect this sort of thing from Starscream, or Shockwave, but you always seemed so indifferent to my attentions. You should know you have nothing to fear from this ghetto glitchmouse. No one could replace you!”

He closed the distance between them and whacked Soundwave hard on the back with a hard, cheerful slap. Stunned, Soundwave nearly fell over from the force of it, and could find no words. Megatron didn't seem to need them, though, still chuckling over the answer he thought he'd found. “That's all for tonight, you're dismissed. Unless you'd rather stay? Bluestreak can wait.”

The Autobot was staring at the floor and showed no reaction, not even a twitch. Unusual, for him to be so still. That one had met the mysterious young Hot Rod too - had been closer than any of them, in fact. Soundwave wished Megatron had not spoken so freely in front of him. What was he thinking, right now?

Politely, Soundwave bowed. "Gratitude for invitation, expressed. However, much work remains to be finished this cycle."

"As you will. Go home and enjoy your own toy, and I'll do the same. Goodnight, Soundwave."

"Lord Megatron." Soundwave backed away, and saw himself out. He did, in truth, have work to do. It was time to open a new investigation.

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## on festivity

The mansion had once been the official residence of Iacon's governor. For hundreds of vorns it had served host to the seat of power in the planet's richest city, a lavish palace of brushed steel and glass that consumed an entire city grid block all on its own. It was the largest single building in the city, full of winding corridors, vaulted ceilings, and huge reception halls. It was also the oldest, unless one counted its substantial destruction and consequent rebuilds after the Decepticon invasion of the city, which Shockwave probably did not. The Decepticons had used it as a temporary shelter and base of operations once Iacon was conquered, but after Megatron's forces left to pursue the *Ark*, Shockwave had been left as its sole occupant. Naturally he offered it to his leader after Megatron's triumphant return from Earth, but Megatron preferred his modern elevated loft at the crown of Decepticon Command, looking down over the whole city. The more antique gubernatorial mansion remained in Shockwave's possession, a vast and un-ignorable monument to both his wealth and his power.

Now it was encrusted with a glittering display of lights, in every color of the spectrum, and brimming over with more mecha than it had seen since the dawn of the civil war. Half the city was there before Soundwave even arrived, awed civilians flocking onto grounds where they would normally be arrested on sight for trespassing. Over the whole estate they swarmed, slurping energon and gawking at the elaborate crystal gardens. They scattered out of Soundwave's path as he followed the center walkway to the mansion proper, Laserbeak on his shoulder and Jazz trotting along in his wake. Two massive doors stood open, revealing the famous governor's ballroom. Barely had he set pede over its threshold when an inconspicuous servant startled him by bellowing out his name.

“DECEPTICON SOUNDWAVE, DIRECTOR OF THE EMPIRE'S SECURITY AND SURVEILLANCE.”

Laserbeak nearly jumped off his shoulder with surprise, but the surrounding mecha only glanced up or paid no attention at all. He must have been doing this all night, and the plain little servant beamed at Soundwave before bowing. Hardly had the announcement left his mouth than Shockwave was there already, shoving aside other mecha and intruding well into Soundwave's personal space before bowing. Behind his elbow, Soundwave could already sense Jazz bristling.

“Director Soundwave, welcome! I am relieved to see you here. Starscream and his vile flock have already descended, and been busy making themselves comfortable.” He directed a sideways scathing look at a few of the seekers lolling by the fountains. “And still Megatron has not come. Starscream has done nothing but drop taunting remarks that he will not. Are you sure he said he would?”

Without actually stepping back, Soundwave tried to lean as far back from Shockwave's hulking presence as he could. “Megatron, declared intention to attend.”

“Oh I hope he meant it. This affair has caused considerable personal expense for me, you know, and it took orns to organize. If he doesn't come, if this doesn't work, it will be for nothing!”

“Megatron, unpredictable. This, well known to both of us. But consideration: all attendees now disposed more favorably towards Shockwave. Event is not completely wasted, regardless of Megatron's attendance.”

Shockwave relaxed a little, partially mollified by Soundwave's words. “True... let these commoners stuff their tanks with my fuel, and let them remember that it was mine – *not* Starscream's.”

“Just don’t run out or anything dangerous like that,” Jazz spoke up, and flashed a cheeky smile when Shockwave stiffened and glowered at him. “Sir.”

“And... you brought your slave. I see he has not been corrected of that penchant for speaking without permission. I hope, for her sake, that he can keep his hands off my Autobot tonight.”

“I don’t know,” Jazz said promptly, “can you keep your hands off my Decepticon?”

Shockwave gaped at Jazz, and hastily Soundwave clapped a hand on Jazz’s shoulder to steer him away. “Premier,” he acknowledged, bowing his head in a show of politeness even as he marched Jazz away at a brisk clip.

“Jazz,” he snapped, “not tonight. Your promise given: best behavior.”

“I’m sorry, it was reflex! I can’t stand it that he’s being so friendly to you, it’s creeping me out.”

“Nevertheless, Jazz will behave. Or Ravage will escort you home.”

“No!” Jazz clutched at the edges of his chest compartment with a flash of desperation in his visor.

“No, please, I want to stay. Primus knows what Shockwave will do if I’m not here: lace your drink, maybe, pull you into a closet, try to make out with you. Nobody deserves such a horrible fate.” Past the edge of Soundwave’s armor he glared at Shockwave, still greeting or ignoring mecha depending on their status. Soundwave grasped his chin and turned Jazz’s attention back to himself.

“Jazz knows my attendance for political support only,” he reminded his slave. “Sole intention, to restore Shockwave to former status so he may resume his own workload and allow me to return to mine. Megatron *will* come tonight. That he have pleasant evening, desirable to me.”

“You say that like I planted ten sticks of dynamite under the buffet.”

Soundwave fixed Jazz with a Look, and quickly he raised his hands palm outward. “I didn’t! Much as I hate this party and its host, I couldn’t see any way to sabotage it without you knowing it was me. And then there’s Chromia, as he - of course - pointed out. I don’t want her to be on the wrong end of his rage if things go badly tonight. So I’m going to suck it up, and serve energon with a smile. Speaking of which...”

Jazz’s gaze had fallen on two of the Constructicons’ slaves, moving through the crowd toward the servants’ hall. He took a step toward them, but Soundwave held him back. At his silent command, Laserbeak flitted from her perch on his shoulder to assume another one on Jazz’s.

“Jazz, will be supervised by Laserbeak for duration of time here.”

“What? All night?” Jazz stared up at him with dismay. “But with a Decepticon on my shoulder, the other bots won’t even want to talk to me!”

“Exactly. That rule, established long ago. Jazz, forgotten?”

Jazz huffed in exasperation. “I haven’t seen them in such a long time. Have some pity, master. Can’t I have just a few words in private?”

“Negative. If Jazz must be here, then this is stipulation.”

His disappointment was obvious, which made Soundwave inclined to think supervision was all the more important. He wondered what Jazz would have been whispering to them if his cassettes were not there to listen.

Laserbeak did not know his true reasons for the assignment, and took a personal affront at Jazz's reaction. Feeling slighted, she nipped the edge of Jazz's audio and he yelped. "Hey, ow! Alright, alright, so you're my date for the night." By way of apology he tickled the underside of her beak, and she melted into his touch. "We'll have a good time without the boss, ne?"

"Return to me when drink preparations complete," Soundwave ordered, ignoring Jazz's haughty look.

"As you command."

A rustle went through the crowd around them, and Shockwave's servant made his last announcement of the night. "LORD MEGATRON! RULER OF THE DECEPTICON EMPIRE, AND SAVIOR OF OUR PLANET!"

"All hail Megatron!" chorused the crowd, and Soundwave turned toward the entrance so that he might bow to Megatron along with everyone else. By the time he straightened, Jazz had vanished.

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Laserbeak began recording the moment Jazz slipped away from Soundwave's shadow. Though he was not present, soon enough Soundwave would see all of what happened next, starting with the way Jazz ducked and weaved his way through the crowds on his way to the servants' hall. He was closing in on the two Autobots at a rapid clip when he and Laserbeak were abruptly waylaid by, of course, Soundwave's other cassettes. Rumble and Frenzy each threw themselves onto one of Jazz's arms, tipping him off balance and nearly steering him straight into other mecha.

"Jazz, you made it!"

"Bout time, too!"

"What, the boss decided you two should catch up on some really vital special hax playing for the millionth time?"

"Before, ya know, dropping in on this totally-not-important-or-anything party of the decade?"

"Sounds like him." They giggled, clearly already giddy with high grade, and clambered further up his arms. Unlike Soundwave, Jazz was not big enough to carry three symbiotes on his shoulders, and he struggled to stay upright. Laserbeak squawked in dismay and flapped her wings, unwilling to give up her perch to her two raucous brothers.

"Oh, hush up, Beak! We wanna ride on Jazz's back too."

"Yeah, Jazz, tell us what awesome thing you're gonna do tonight, cuz we don't wanna miss it."

"Spike the fuel?"

"Dance on the tables?"

"Pour energon down Shockwave's back plating?"

"Or just short circuit the power system and ruin the whole party?"

“Tell, tell!”

“Okay, that’s it.” At last Jazz managed to get a grasp on each of their armor plating and plucked them off, dropping them on the nearest convenient edge of a buffet table. “Sorry to disappoint you, my little hell minions, but I don’t plan on dishing out anything but energon tonight. I promised Soundwave that I would be good.”

“Aw, but -”

“Incidentally, your sister’s recording.”

Rumble and Frenzy’s gazes flipped straight over to Laserbeak, who smirked and arched her wings in a smug posture.

“It was Rumble’s idea,” Frenzy said quickly, and got punched in the head for it.

“Slagger!”

“That is, boss, we were just testing Jazz for you. To make sure he was really gonna be good all night.”

“Um, yeah, that’s it.”

“And *thanks*, Beak, for telling us you were recording.”

Laserbeak cheeped something to the effect that they should have known better anyway, to which they huffed. Again Jazz glanced to the servants’ hall, into which another Autobot had just entered.

“Anyway, don’t you two have a ballroom of gossiping partygoers to eavesdrop on? I assume that was what Soundwave tasked you with for the night.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“But then what are you doing?”

“I am off to be with my own kind for a little while. And I’m late. Have fun tonight, kids.” He tipped his fingers in salute and peeled away. Whether he heard or not was uncertain, but Laserbeak’s audios picked up Rumble saying, “*We’re* your own kind.”

The twins vanished behind them as Jazz slipped through the crowd, and this time he was finally able to reach the servants’ hall without interference. This space was quieter, mostly empty of mecha, and it was the work of a moment to find the doors to the mixing room. He reached to push one open, then hesitated. From there he looked back at Laserbeak on his shoulder, then back to the doors again.

“Laserbeak,” he cooed, “my darling casseticon. You know that I adore you beyond measure... but I wonder if you would mind not sticking to my shoulder joint once I go into that room? You see, if you stay where you are, the other Autobots might be afraid to come anywhere near me.”

Laserbeak’s response to that was to ruffle up her wing platelets and utter a decisive, thoroughly negative, squawk.

“I know that you have Soundwave’s orders!” Jazz added hastily. “And I’m not asking you to disobey him. All he commanded was that you keep surveillance on me, and you can do that better

from a higher angle anyway. Right?"

Laserbeak contemplated that, wing platelets settling back into place, and chirped an affirmative.

"I thought so. And I think it will make things easier on all of us if you keep to the rafters."

Laserbeak edged down along his arm and Jazz held it aloft for her, allowing her better direct optical contact. Determinedly she pecked him on the cheek with the point of her beak, in what outsiders might assume was an attack. Jazz just rubbed the tiny dent and grinned. "That's right, I'm still your date. I promise I won't forget it." Affectionately he rubbed the underside of her beak, then let his fingers wander under her wing joints for some much-appreciated scratching. His fingers were half buried in Laserbeak's platelets when the door swung open and Windcharger nearly walked right into the both of them.

"Jazz," he bleated, bolted to the spot with a blank stare that couldn't help but follow Jazz's hand to Laserbeak. "Um -"

"Hey, Charger!" Jazz greeted cheerfully. Casually he hoisted his arm and Laserbeak launched into the air, flapping her way into the mixing room and finding a suitable perch up atop a tall storage cabinet. Windcharger backed up hurriedly as she passed overhead, then continued to back over the door threshold as Jazz followed.

"I- we didn't think you'd be here."

"Of course I'm here; why wouldn't I be?" He herded the Autobot all the way into the room, face lit up with a bright smile. "Hey everyone!"

The mixing room was full of Autobots, all of them busily concocting complicated drinks for their masters. At Jazz's entrance they all looked up, and a few of them nodded, but no one spoke. If Jazz was expecting them to tackle him with joyful greetings he must have been disappointed, but his smile did not flicker for even a second. Promptly he sidled up to a tabletop where Perceptor and Fireflight were measuring ingredients into hot beakers.

"How goes it, my mechs? Can I assist?"

"We're fine," Perceptor answered curtly. Fireflight looked at Jazz and then away, without speaking at all. "It's crowded in here anyway. You better run along to Soundwave."

"Oh, he can get along alright for a breem or two," Jazz assured him, ignoring the subtext with perfect ease. "I like the company in here." With hardly a pause he kept going past their workstation and closed in on Bumblebee, the only bot in the room with a smile for Jazz. Still deaf to the world, he beamed silently at Jazz and Jazz grinned right back, lacing his fingers through Bumblebee's and squeezing his hand in greeting.

"Steady now," Hoist coached, at the table where he and Grapple were topping off crystal flutes with their fresh mixture. They filled a tray's worth of them without spilling a drop, and both exhaled with relief before sloshing the leftovers into several small cubes. "And there's even enough for the rest of us. Nicely done, Grapple. Here, Bumblebee and... Jazz."

He waved to get Bumblebee's attention, and held out a pair of cubes to them both. "It's going to be a long night, I'm sure. Best to fortify yourself."

Bumblebee took the cube eagerly, but Jazz glanced reflexively at the recording Laserbeak and shook his head. "Ah, no thanks. Just fueled before I got here."

“Not with anything this good,” Hoist insisted, still holding out the cube. “We’ve been working on this batch since we got here, try it.”

“I *can*’t,” Jazz said shortly, and both Hoist and Grapple blinked at him in surprise. “I mean- please. You worked to make it, you should enjoy it. Don’t worry about me.”

Firmly he pressed the offered cube back toward its maker and this time Hoist did not argue, looking a little hurt. Determinedly Jazz plucked up his grin again and changed the subject. “So, how are things? The Constructicons treating you alright? It looks like Mixmaster is teaching you some fancy culinary tricks.”

Now it was Hoist and Grapple’s turn to look at Laserbeak, and shuffled uncomfortably. “We cannot complain, I suppose.”

“They do keep us busy.”

“Day *and* night.” That last part made Jazz’s smile fade a little, but then the doors swung open again and Bluestreak limped inside.

“Blue!” Before anyone else could move Jazz skipped across the room and pounced on his hands, clutching them close to his own chest. “Hey kid, it’s been too long and I’ve missed you so much. How you doin’?”

Bluestreak’s answer was a wan smile and a shrug, then he moved to give Jazz a real hug. Still mindful of Soundwave’s rules, Jazz quickly backed out of range and pretended not to see the flash of hurt in Bluestreak’s optics. “Uh, here - let’s get you a drink. Hoist and Grapple just mixed up something special, you’ll love it.” He towed the silent Bluestreak to a supplies crate and sat him down on it, pressing a cube into his hands when one was handed to him. “What does he want? Don’t you worry about making his drink, you just sit there and I’ll do it for you.”

“Never mind,” Perceptor said flatly, already reaching for some canisters. “I got it. High grade distilled Earth style, with carbon, copper, and gypsum, right?”

Bluestreak nodded, with a flash of a grateful smile for Perceptor that left Jazz looking left out and discomfited. “But- let me help. I want to.”

“I told you, we’re fine. And you already have company, I think.” Perceptor shot a suspicious look at Laserbeak, whose hackles rose slightly in reflex.

“What, LB?” Jazz said airily. “Aw, don’t you worry about this little lady. She’s not here to hurt anybody.” He snatched a handful of crystallized energon bits from an ingredients bowl and held them up to her in offering. Though Laserbeak was all too aware that she was surrounded by hostile Autobots, and did not like the looks they were giving her, she had enough faith in her own status - and enough weakness for her favorite treat - to ignore the threat in favor of a snack. Rapidly she snapped up a tasty beakful from Jazz’s palm, and chirped when Jazz winked at her. “See? She was just hungry.”

Perceptor watched the exchange, a hard look in his optics. “I guess you’re best friends with all of them by now, aren’t you?”

“Ravage and I are still working through our issues,” Jazz admitted in good cheer. “But let’s talk about more interesting things. How did Starscream take it when that blue kid with the fast mouth showed up bearing Shockwave’s invite?”

Perceptor was concentrating on his task again, and shrugged. “I don’t know. Does it matter?”

“I’m curious.”

“Well *I’m* busy. For the third time, Jazz, just take your little spy and go back to Soundwave already. We all know it’s where you want to be.”

Jazz stiffened, and just as quickly as all the Autobots had looked up, they looked away again. This time, Jazz didn’t bother pretending. “Percy, you are comin’ off as unusually waspish tonight. Or should I say seekerish? You got somethin’ on your mind?”

“Yes,” snapped Perceptor. “And it’s the rumors about you and your Decepticon master.”

“Rumors? About lil ol’ me?”

“Lots of them. And they all seem to agree that you are having a pleasant - even enjoyable - time living with Soundwave.”

“Oh sure, well, you all know that mech is one party after another,” Jazz drawled. “The mask and the monotone are just there to throw others off the track.”

“First Aid says you’re in love with him.”

“Does he?” Jazz laughed, a light and carefree sound. “Aid needs to rack up more experience before diagnosing such a dangerous disease.”

“Or maybe you need to stop treating us all like we don’t have *optics*.” Out of patience, Perceptor slammed his mixing bowl against the countertop and those nearest to him jumped. “And just come clean about your true feelings!”

“My true *feelings*,” Jazz retaliated without pause, “are that I will deal with my Decepticon in my own way, and you will deal with yours. We’re all doing what we have to do to get by.”

“Come now, Perceptor,” Hoist spoke up, trying to intercede. “We have a long night before us. Let’s not get into this now, hmm?”

“Get into ‘what’ now?” Jazz asked suspiciously, and Perceptor spared a single exasperated look for Hoist before deciding to ignore his advice.

“They sent Brawn back to Earth,” he stated, the words curdling with bitterness. “Do you even care?”

Surprise flashed across Jazz’s visor, followed by sympathy. “I’m sorry about that, Perce. I didn’t know. I don’t hear as much as I used to.”

“You don’t have time to *try*, too busy fawning over Soundwave - or dancing for him, according to the latest gossip. I suppose it’s more important to entertain him than to bother with any of us anymore.”

“What do you want me to do?” The edge in Jazz’s voice was turning harder as his own patience ran thin. “I live with him. It’s not like I was given any choice about it.”

“That’s a lie.”

Everyone in the room looked at Fireflight, who had just spoken for the first time. Wingtips twitching, he swallowed hard under Jazz’s gaze but did not drop his own.

“Beg pardon, little red?”

“We all know what happened, Jazz,” Perceptor sneered. “Thundercracker told Fireflight everything.”

“You’re gonna have to be a little more specific.”

“It was the day of those horrible riots,” Fireflight went on to say. Immediately Jazz tensed, and turned all his attention to the task of filling a tray with drinks. “Soundwave was caught spying on Starscream, and he wasn’t supposed to be. Megatron said Skywarp could bring you back home.

But Thundercracker told me you refused, right in front of all the seekers. He said you fought Skywarp, and screamed you’d rather stay with Soundwave than come back to us.”

“You turned your back on us!”

“What I did,” Jazz corrected acidly, “was turn myself into a bargaining chip that Starscream could trade in for that academy he’s been pining for and is the only other thing in this universe outside Skyfire that could make him less miserable - and less inclined to smack *you* on the head all day and night.” Pointedly he poked his finger in the center of Perceptor’s chest. “Looking remarkably less dented already, I see. You’re welcome.”

Stunned, Perceptor had no response other than to gape. Jazz scooped up the tray and lifted it gracefully to his shoulder, suddenly all smiles again. “So, these ready?”

He made for the doors, and Perceptor fumbled for words. “But- I- no! Jazz! Why do you always have to twist everything?”

“Sorry, these are getting cold. Gotta go!”

Graciously he bowed out of the room, and the only other one to move was Laserbeak herself, floating along behind.

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As Jazz was dealing with his own faction, so Soundwave was dealing with his. Patiently he waited for the cheering and applause to die off, and watched Shockwave rush to greet Megatron. They exchanged a few words, Shockwave bowing after nearly every one of them, and then eventually Megatron turned and made for Soundwave. In respectful greeting, he bowed, noting that already this plan seemed to be working. Megatron thrived on adulation, and the praise of the crowds - themselves already carried away by plentiful free fuel sloshing about - was like a custom high grade drink to their leader. His optics glowed with enthusiasm.

“Lord Megatron.”

“Soundwave,” he replied cheerfully. “Seems you were right about easing tensions; this party has put the mecha in a good mood, hasn’t it?”

Briefly Soundwave considered the starving beggars and ghettodwellers still outside Shockwave’s gates, but knew better than to mention it. “Guests, pleased by your presence,” he said instead. “As is Premier Shockwave.”

“Yes, so he said.” A little of the good cheer in Megatron’s voice turned flat. “Three times.”



From behind Megatron's elbow Shockwave shot Soundwave a panicky look, and Soundwave thought fast. "Shockwave, merely relieved. Now spared from exclusive conversation with Seekers." He tilted his head towards the second trine, all of whom were working hard to get drunk as fast as possible and not being very quiet while they did it. Megatron laughed, and Shockwave's vents exhaled in relief.

"If you please, my lord." Hopefully he gestured toward the ballroom's dais, still crowned in the center by the centuries-old governor's throne. "You will be most comfortable here, while the slaves prepare your refreshment."

Though still more interested in waving to the crowds, Megatron allowed himself to be escorted up onto the dais, and Soundwave and Shockwave took two of the less grand chairs gathered around the throne. It was impossible to not notice that Shockwave's slave was already kneeling by his seat, positioned there like a display of artwork in her perfect stillness. Wryly Soundwave noted that not only did it draw attention to Shockwave's place, it ensured that nobody but he would be able to sit in the chair directly next to Megatron. Not long after, Scrapper came to sit with them, as was appropriate for the leader of the Constructicon gestalt, and Hook accompanied him as well. Somewhat less appropriately, Starscream took his time before finally ambling up onto the dais to join them.

"My lord Megatron," he greeted unctuously, dipping into an ostentatious bow.

"Starscream," was the cursory response, which put Starscream off not at all.

"How marvelous to see you here," he fawned. "Truly a pleasant *surprise*. Seems I owe Skywarp that five credits after all." Smugly he turned his gaze to Shockwave. "You must be ventilating easier."

"If you mean 'am I honored by my lord's attendance'," Shockwave replied stiffly, "then of course, yes. It is a gathering meant to celebrate Decepticon officers, after all. The loyal ones, anyway."

Starscream affected a wounded look, draping himself in the nearest convenient chair. "In other words, you mean those Decepticons who are *not* responsible for a black market implosion that nearly destroy--"

"Starscream, not seen in some time," Soundwave interrupted hastily. "Much progress made in establishing new academy?"

Starscream blinked at him, slightly taken aback, but if there was one thing Starscream could stand to be interrupted for, it was an excuse to talk more about himself. "Why yes, now that you mention it. Since I was officially able to procure the lab compound -" He shot a sideways triumphant smirk at Shockwave "- my slave and I have been taking meticulous inventory of its assets, repairing broken equipment, and installing new terminals. I am ever so grateful to the Constructicons for their assistance in hooking the buildings into the power grid." Coquettishly he batted his optical light at the two of them.

"Wasn't really asked," Scrapper mumbled into his cube, which Starscream did not hear.

"When we are able to educate a generation of students," he was busy gushing, "I believe Cybertron will have officially reached a new age of prosperity."

"Careful Starscream," Megatron murmured. "It's the results of this glorified night school that I'll be looking at, before anyone can say anything about a new age of prosperity."

“Oh, I’m confident it will pay its dividends. Scientific discovery is the hallmark of an advanced culture. Don’t you agree, Soundwave?”

Expectantly he looked at Soundwave, who slid a cautious glance to Shockwave. “Affirmative,” he answered diplomatically, “but, one of many. Plentiful production of goods, another.”

Shockwave’s optic brightened, and Starscream’s mouth turned into a slight frown. “Or maybe it’s just the leisure time to sit around and plan frivolous parties like this one,” he suggested. “Wht do you think, my lord? What is the true definition of a perfect civilization?”

Megatron took the time to consider the question, reclining comfortably into his chair and tapping his fingertips against one another thoughtfully. “The one that survives, of course,” he finally answered. “If it can’t even last, then it deserves to become history. Like our own planet’s so-called ‘golden age’. If it was really made of gold, it would have never ended.”

Primly, Shockwave nodded. “Quite right, my lo-”

“I found Earth to be an interesting case study,” Megatron continued. “The humans there live such short lives; whole empires could rise and fall in the space of a vorn. Pity you weren’t there, Shockwave. You could have learned much from watching them.”

Wearily Soundwave watched Shockwave deflate under Megatron’s gaze, and knew Megatron was not quite through being angry at his premier. He had come to the party, a sure sign that forgiveness was coming, but as per Megatron’s usual style, he was not going to make it easy.

“I-I have always regretted not being able to serve you on the front lines of Earth,” Shockwave stammered. “By your command, I contented myself with the stewardship of Cybertron.”

“Governing territory already conquered,” Soundwave spoke up, “often considered least glamorous of Decepticon duties. However, no less crucial to war effort. Without Shockwave’s guardianship, Iacon most likely to have been destroyed by renegade Autobots.”

Megatron glanced at Chromia, motionless at Shockwave’s pedes, and allowed himself a small shrug. “True enough. It was a necessary chore, if a boring one.”

Now Starscream was starting to catch on, going by the suspicious looks he was shooting at Soundwave, but luckily he was distracted at that moment by the return of the slaves. A picture of perfect grace and silence, Jazz served Megatron first, lowering himself almost to his knees and gaze fixed deferentially on the floor. He was accompanied only by First Aid, who carried the tray and served flute glasses to the other officers. Before Soundwave had even been offered his own, Laserbeak landed on his knee and surprised him with an immediate demand for entry. Though Soundwave had docked his symbiotes often enough in public during the long war, this was a rather inappropriate time and place for upload. He declined to open up, answering her request with merely a touch of curiosity. Without answering, Laserbeak pressed again, even more urgently.

Now even more curious, Soundwave relented and opened his chest. A couple of the other officers gave him a sideways glance for it, but fortunately nobody seemed bothered. The conversation continued, flowing around him, and for just a breem he turned his attention inward to watch her recording.

By the end of it, Soundwave had seen everything that happened in the servants’ room and now understood Laserbeak’s insistence. His gaze flew back to Jazz, still serving the Decepticons with his usual poise, his expression a perfect mask of polite attention. Nobody would ever guess anything was wrong. The young Protectobot - whom Laserbeak had noted was not in the servants’ room at

the time - was certainly happy enough to work with Jazz, which included letting Jazz serve Megatron rather than him. Soundwave watched him pour a second serving into Megatron's glass, unhappily aware that Megatron's thoughtful gaze was following Jazz as well.

"Lord Megatron!" Everyone looked up to see that Astrotrain and Blitzwing had come to present themselves, well polished and smartly saluting their emperor, for all the good that would do. It was well known in the halls of Decepticon Command that, as angry as Megatron was with Shockwave for letting the city markets degenerate, he was just as furious with the triplechangers for letting the riot turn into such a crisis. He had not spoken directly to them since that cycle, so far as Soundwave knew. No doubt the two of them were hoping that this party signaled forgiveness for them as well as their superior, but Soundwave doubted it would be that easy. Megatron was far more likely to forgive economic mishaps than military ones.

Impatiently Megatron grunted, and waved away their salute. "What do you two want?"

"Uh, just to offer our greetings, sir."

"And to tell you how pleased we are to see you here, sir."

"It is not what pleases you that interests me," Megatron reminded them sharply, and they swallowed identical swallows. "Is that all?"

"Well, that is -"

"We, uh, did hope we could introduce our friend." They parted to reveal a third mech, standing outside the dais edge until they yanked him forward by the elbows to stand between them. "Lord Megatron, may we present Lawkeeper Octane."

"He's a great kid."

"Real hard worker."

"One of our best lawkeepers."

Megatron looked unimpressed. "Didn't I fire all the lawkeepers?"

"Well, yes."

"But, we retained Octane here at our own expense."

"As an assistant, you know."

"To helps us run things right."

"Then Primus help him," Megatron said dryly. Soundwave, of course, already knew about this young Octane through the reports his symbiotes brought him, but it was his first time to see the mech in the same room. Going by the kibble studding his armor plates, he too was a triplechanger, not that this was any surprise. Triple-capable transformers tended to be a clannish bunch, and usually preferred their own company to others. No doubt Astrotrain and Blitzwing kept him around the office for other reasons besides deskwork, not that it would have bothered this shining-opticked civilian. Completely oblivious to the hostility surrounding him, Octane was squirming with excitement.

"My lord Megatron, it is such an honor! Blitz here promised that I'd get to meet you tonight, but I didn't really believe him, at least not until now. To think, that I'm standing on the same platform as

*the Lord Megatron -"*

"Not anymore, you're not," Shockwave said crisply, currently on the receiving end of Megatron's exasperated look. Meaningfully he tilted his head back to the crowd, probably sending a terse comm to accompany it, and Astrotrain and Blitzwing sensibly took the hint.

"Uh, anyway, thank you for your time sir."

"It is our honor, sir."

They bowed and backed off the dais as fast as they could, dragging a still chatty Octane between them. Shockwave's vents exhaled in relief, and Starscream smothered a giggle into his glass.

"I hope those triple twits aren't promising him other things," Megatron muttered, his gaze trailing them into the party. "Like, say, a shot at becoming a Decepticon one day."

"I'm sure they would never be so rash," Shockwave hurried to say. "Though, the continued absence of the Combaticons does beg the question of whether the Decepticons may be due for more recruitment."

"Oh, not this again," groaned Starscream. "You still think we can auction off our sigil to the highest bidder, never mind that the war's over. Without an enemy to fight, what do we need with more soldiers?"

"Even in peacetime, Commander Starscream, the planet needs a properly sized force of authority."

"To, say, put down a riot or two."

As they argued, Soundwave's gaze happened to fall upon the Protectobot kneeling by Starscream's seat. He was busy staring anxiously at Chromia, again, when he unexpectedly convulsed with pain and nearly dropped the decanter. Jazz rescued him just in time, one hand to save the energon and another clapped over First Aid's mouth before he could make a sound. Soundwave saw the questioning look in his visor, but First Aid just shook his head and looked away. Jazz didn't understand, but Soundwave expected it was due to his gestalt link. Frenzy had just reported that the second trine was having some fun with their slave Groove in one of the ballroom alcoves.

Jazz pressed the now-empty tray into First Aid's hands and pointed back to the servants' hall, giving him a chance for a break. Visor pale, First Aid nodded and crept off the platform.

"Lord Megatron," Starscream drawled, while this was going on, "please explain to our *clerical* governor why a soldier is not made by patronage of money, will you?"

Dismissively Megatron grunted. "I have no interest in selling the Decepticon title to just any civilian. But Shockwave is not wrong, either."

Starscream, working his way into another smirk, was caught offguard and blinked with surprise. Just as surprised to receive Megatron's support, Shockwave perked up.

"We did lose mecha in the war, after all. And certain mecha have managed to get themselves lost after the war too. Maybe it is time we look for fresh fuel to fill the ranks." Idly he shrugged, toying with the glass in his hand. "It's something to think about, at any rate. Once I start looking, maybe I'll find just the 'right' mech."

That distant look had filtered into his optics again, and Soundwave was suddenly seized with a nasty suspicion of the mech Megatron might have in mind. Starscream and Shockwave noticed the look

too, and exchanged a glance that was more quizzical than adversarial, then looked to him as well. Worse, Jazz was watching Megatron's expression with more than a little curiosity of his own.

"If Decepticon recruitment forthcoming," he pointed out, "then accounting for future allotments must be made. Premier Shockwave, with such extensive knowledge in finance, best positioned to analyze when or if recruitment a possibility."

Eagerly Shockwave nodded. "Yes, yes, of course. Such a proposition does involve careful analysis for fuel allotments, not to mention estate distribution. A happy task to attend to, indeed, if our Lord Megatron does conclude it's time to induct new Decepticons."

As Soundwave had predicted, Megatron scowled at this, and the strange distant look in his optics vanished. "Numbers," he sneered. "They are always spoiling my glory. Decepticon ideals should not be measured in formulas or calculations; they are meant to be free, as we are."

"I completely agree, my lord," Shockwave said smoothly.

Starscream arched a rather skeptical look over his glass. "*You? Do?*"

"I agree that our revolutionary ideals *should* not be measured so pragmatically. Sadly though, income must be paid, and fuel provided, so that your soldiers may fight another day for the Decepticon cause. As you said earlier, it is a necessary chore, if a boring one. And it is my honor to worry over it, so that you need not have to."

Shockwave bowed his head, the perfect touch to his surprisingly gracious turn of phrase, and Soundwave saw an unmistakably impressed look in Megatron's optics.

"Well said, my 'clerical governor'. The hungry fuel tanks of all my soldiers thank you for your service."

Megatron tipped his glass to Shockwave's in cheers, and Soundwave knew forgiveness had just been unofficially granted. Shockwave knew it too, and his optic brightened joyfully. Soundwave already knew what he would see even before he glanced at Starscream, whose optics sure enough glittered with disgust. That much was no surprise, but more importantly, he looked to his own slave. Jazz was kneeling in the shadows behind Scrapper's chair, visor locked on Shockwave, his expression twisted with fury and disappointment. The premier was not to be permanently disgraced after all, and the healed empire would live to see another day.

*Soundwave*, he thought with relief, *eleven*.

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Jazz vanished from Scrapper's shadow, and Soundwave was not even aware that he'd moved until he materialized without warning between him and Shockwave. He was lifting the decanter, and for one horrible moment Soundwave panicked that Jazz might actually take Frenzy's suggestion and pour the entire contents right down Shockwave's back.

He did not. Instead he reached for Shockwave's glass, one hand gliding over Shockwave's wrist joint to hold the glass in a steady position before pouring him a refill. "If you please, sir," he murmured, velvety polite, but Soundwave was close enough to see how hard his grip was closing

around the joint - almost hard enough to crush the finer struts. Soundwave could also hear Shockwave's slight hiss of pain, and saw the flicker of anger in his gold optic, but he wouldn't dare complain about such a small pain before Megatron or Starscream. Jazz filled his thin flute glass and retreated back to a kneeling position, to most optics a perfect picture of obedience. Megatron's optics were following him again, and this time he spoke.

"I must say, Soundwave, I'm seeing a marked improvement in the behavior of your usually insolent slave. It's impressive, considering he spent several years under the seekers, with little effect on his attitude. What is your secret, I wonder?"

Soundwave was not quite sure how to answer that, but Shockwave was happy to do it for him.

"Perhaps it is the regular practice of handfeeding, my lord. I recently witnessed the two of them engaging in it while in the city's market. The Autobot is not allowed to consume any fuel except directly from his own master's hand. I assume the intent is to condition him to obedience."

"An interesting technique, Soundwave," Megatron commented. "Is it successful?"

In the corner of his vision, Soundwave could see the light behind Jazz's visor turning as brittle as ice. "Progress," he answered carefully, "commensurate with expectations."

"I would say more than," Shockwave spoke up yet again, oblivious to or ignoring Soundwave's warning look. "Every mech in my nightspot was talking about it, the next cycle after you brought him in for that 'personal performance'. They said he danced for you half the night."

Starscream almost choked on his last sip of energon, and Megatron laughed out loud. "Jazz, you dance for Soundwave now?"

Jazz smiled, in a way that did not reach the cold shine in his visor. "I do as my master commands."

"Are you good at it?"

Jazz stiffened, just barely perceptibly, and Soundwave saw the flash of pride in his visor. He opened his mouth to answer, and hastily Soundwave drained his glass.

"Jazz, refill required."

He caught Jazz by surprise, but when they made optical contact Jazz took the hint and shut his mouth. "Yes, master."

He looked away from Megatron to serve Soundwave, but now of course Megatron was looking at Soundwave, a little nonplussed. "Jazz, pleasing in all respects," he offered as answer. "Particularly when obedient."

"With all due respect, Director Soundwave," Shockwave said haughtily, "though your slave is showing - some - progress, I am confident that combining *negative* reinforcement with any rewards is the most effective method in training one's Autobot. My lovely Chromia here is a perfect model of obedience, though she was a raging, vicious cutthroat when first gifted to me." Delicately he swept a clawtip around the curve of her face, to which her only reaction was to blink.

"Perfect model of brainlessness, you mean," Starscream remarked. Disdainfully he eyed the Autobot and her blank stare. "Honestly, what good is it to have an Autobot in your berth if they don't even have the sense to know what's happening to them? You might as well build yourself a drone. Or... have you been there, done that?"

Shockwave glared at Starscream. "Unlike some mecha, I do not require a constant flow of chatter

for entertainment. And I do not need her to speak to know she understands I am master of her world.”

“Well,” Starscream commiserated, “at least you’re *someone’s* boss.”

Shockwave’s optic curdled with hatred, so yet again Soundwave stepped in. “Premier Shockwave, this event flowing smoothly, in spite of massive scale. Your organization skills, admirable.”

“Thank you, Director Soundwave.” The glow in that optic evened out, only for Starscream to turn his own glare back on Soundwave. “It was, of course, no real task compared to leading events such as the mid-vorn celebration, which was so successful -”

“And expensive,” Starscream interjected.

“- But I remember the awe of the crowds as they came to see Lord Megatron, undoubtedly the greatest night of their lives -”

“At least right up until that other greatest night when they went rioting -”

“Spectacle of mid-vorn, impressive,” Soundwave broke in, almost desperately. Scrapper and Hook were starting to exchange bemused looks, he could see them. “Surely Lord Megatron expects even grander celebration for beginning of new vorn.”

Megatron had been watching the two volley with as much interest as anyone else, but at this suggestion he nodded in agreement. “Yes, I suppose I am, now that you mention it. I will have nothing less for the first vorn of true peace that Cybertron has known in centuries.”

“And of course,” Shockwave hastened to add, “the first complete vorn of your rule, which will last for all of our lifetimes. I am ready to start planning such a celebration even now, if that’s what it will take to make the ceremony absolutely perfect.”

To this Starscream gave a nauseated roll of the optics, and apparently decided he’d run out of patience.

“*Okay, what gives?*” he demanded, on Soundwave’s personal channel. “*Why are you of all mechs helping Shockwave resurrect himself? He died! You helped me bury the body, remember?*”

“*My intention, only to help Shockwave recover former status and former workload,*” Soundwave answered calmly. “*Soundwave, currently responsible for many of his duties.*”

It was a good answer, an answer that had satisfied Jazz, but already he could see Starscream wasn’t buying. Those optics narrowed to thin crimson slits.

“*That’s a load of hot slag. You’re never afraid of extra work; what’s really going on? After that day of the riots, I thought we were best friends. All this polish and shine for Shockwave is starting to hurt my feelings.*”

“*Antagonism unnecessary. No malice intended toward seekers, or Shockwave. Soundwave, still neutral between you.*”

Starscream’s gaze moved to Jazz. “*Unless he’s on the line.*”

Soundwave stiffened, but suddenly Starscream lost all interest in their private conversation. First Aid had returned to the dais with a new decanter, and he extended his glass for filling.

“Energon production seems to be improving, at any rate,” he commented, to the group at large.  
“Although prices have not been lowered, there is at least more of it to buy.”

A smug look crossed Megatron’s expression. “Of course production is improving... now that I’ve taken steps to expand our labor force at the source.”

“So the rumors *are* true,” Starscream said contemptuously, optics glittering coldly. “You’ve been shipping criminals to Earth to work in the fuel camps!”

A few optics flared with surprise, Shockwave’s and Jazz’s among them. Jazz turned his astonished gaze to Soundwave, which he ignored for now. Megatron was swirling his energon about in the cut-glass flute, admiring how the light flashed and sparkled. “You act as if there were something wrong with the idea, Starscream. Had we not all agreed that Earth production needed a boost?”

“A very wise and clever plan, my lord,” Shockwave rushed to say. “Prisoners cost us in credits to incarcerate and fuel. Indeed, why not use them to help ease the shortage that their own riot brought about?”

“There were other responsible parties for that riot, as I recall,” Starscream reminded Shockwave, but his attention stayed on Megatron. “And the Earth fuel camps are for Autobots. They always have been.”

“They are for those that defied me,” Megatron corrected, the edge in his voice a little harder now. “And for those that *will* defy me, whosoever is foolish enough.”

“So now a few complaints about the price of energon is enough to earn a lifetime’s slavery, same that we give our war enemies?”

“A raised price that you yourself recommended, as *I* recall. These dissidents are indirectly protesting you, Starscream. I should think you’d be happy they are being punished.”

Somewhat caught out, Starscream glowered at Megatron’s smile. “I- I suggested that we *temporarily* raise the price to squash demand, while we worked to close the shortage gap. Not keep it permanently through the stratosphere while locking up anyone who dares say he’s hungry!”

“Commander Starscream,” Shockwave interposed, anxious to keep himself in the conversation, “I do hesitate to criticize you again. But I really must correct this notion of yours that the price of energon can be arranged this way or that way on a daily basis. This is not aerial combat, it’s city management. Prices are fixed according to delicate formulas I have spent centuries developing, and kept there for a reason. Constant price fluctuation induces panic and wild speculation. I can hardly blame you for not knowing these things; you do not have my long expertise in the subject.”

“Shockwave’s expertise,” Soundwave tried quickly, “gratefully acc-”

“Oh, stuff your formulas,” Starscream snapped. “Your so-called expertise turned the entire lawkeeping department into the servants of black market dealers. There was plenty enough panic and wild speculation then!”

“That does not make you any more expert on energon rationing,” Shockwave retorted. “Why so agitated, Commander Starscream? As a ranking Decepticon officer, you pay nothing at all for your allotments. Do you have some special concern for these particular dissidents?”

Soundwave saw the way Megatron’s optics kindled with interest, but Starscream dodged the accusation with a haughty toss of the head. “If I did, would it be any concern of yours? You have your favorites too, going by the way your departments treat some merchants.”



“You mistake practicality for favoritism. Large factories and businesses use energon more efficiently than small ones. They provide work for many more mecha at once, and are easier to supervise. Say what you will about the, ah, unfortunate market riots, but you must admit that zero percent of the empire’s large fuel centers were involved. So is it any wonder that I believe such institutions should be fostered and encouraged by the empire?”

“Fostered and encouraged into paying their own laborers starvation wages, so much so they can barely afford the energon they themselves pack and ship into the city!”

“A smaller cube in the hand does not excuse ungrateful criticism of the very empire that allows them to live in peace and have any work at all,” Shockwave said tartly. “Clearly, they have forgotten that. I wonder if perhaps you have as well.”

Miserably Soundwave watched the argument accelerate, and how Jazz’s self-satisfied smile spread wider with every word. Why was he the only one to notice it? Why did they insist on tearing each other apart and ignoring the real threat that knelt at their pedes? He activated his vocalizer to say something – anything – that would interrupt this fight and change course to a safer subject, but before he could First Aid did it for him. Without warning Megatron’s fist smashed into the young Protectobot’s face and he hit the floor hard, a single cry of pain escaping before he clamped his mouth shut against more. Immediately he froze there on the floor, properly terrified by the looming presence of Megatron standing over him. His crimson optics blazed with fury.

Everyone was startled into silence, and Soundwave heard a tiny hiccup in Hook’s vents. He was suddenly tense in his seat, optics locked on his cowering slave, but he didn’t dare open his mouth.

Megatron looked ready to murder First Aid right then and there, but when he raised his fist he became aware of the shocked stares around him, and – strangely enough – hesitated. There was no telling what would have happened to the slave next, but it was in that fleeting hesitation that Jazz seized his chance and lunged to close the distance between them. Without wasting so much as a nanoklik he splashed an entire cube of sticky energon right in First Aid’s face.

“Aid!” he reprimanded sharply. “How could you be so careless? Look at you, you’re a mess! You are not fit to serve our Lord Megatron in that state. Go get yourself cleaned off, and don’t come back until you’re ready to walk straight like the rest of us.”

First Aid’s vents sputtered from the influx of energon thrown at him, but otherwise he didn’t move, staring at Jazz and Megatron through slightly glazed optics. Soundwave was surprised that Megatron was allowing this interference from Jazz, but for whatever lucky reason Megatron merely watched the two slaves and remained silent. Jazz had to nudge – and then nearly shove – Aid up onto his pedes and to the edge of the dais. Hand still clutching at his dented face, he stumbled backwards and nearly fell off onto the main floor, after which he disappeared with alacrity. Hook sagged with ill-disguised relief back into his chair, but now it was Soundwave who was acutely aware that his slave was standing before Megatron. From here he could see Jazz’s hands trembling as he bowed.

“I do apologize, my lord. Is there... anything I can do to compensate for his clumsiness?”

As it was perfectly obvious that there had been no clumsiness at all, Jazz had no way of knowing what he was offering to make up for. Soundwave had rarely seen Megatron look so furious with one of the Autobot slaves, and for a sparkstopping moment he thought he’d take his anger out on Jazz instead. The removal of the Protectobot, though, seemed to ease Megatron’s temper, and he grunted in a dismissive sort of way.

“Always the most eager to please when another Autobot is in trouble. How long are you going to keep throwing yourself between me and them?”

“As long as you keep letting me get away with it,” Jazz said blithely, or tried to, his voice shaking just a little when Megatron stroked his hand alongside Jazz’s face. Soundwave saw his bristling armor plates relax, amusement filtering into his optics.

“That always was the Autobots’ greatest weakness: trying to save one another.”

Jazz’s back plating tightened at the none-too-subtle reference to his Prime’s death, but kept his mouth shut against any retort he was tempted to give. Apparently willing to overlook the Protectobot’s transgression, Megatron settled back into his seat. Languidly he crossed one leg over another, one pede dangling expectantly mid-air.

“Get on with it then, slave. You know what I like.”

“Yes, the sound of me screaming,” Jazz responded pertly. “Hard to forget, really.” He flashed a humorless smile at Megatron and sank to his knees, optics fixed on Megatron as if their audience of Decepticons did not even exist. He did not look at Soundwave. “*Negah nakon,*” he murmured, so softly that Soundwave’s advanced audios could barely pick up on the sound. “*You shouldn’t watch. It’s only going to upset you.*”

Briefly he pressed his forehead to the floor in a display of deference, and then he began. On his hands and knees, he extended his glossa and traced it along the gap of Megatron’s ankle joint. The red glow of Megatron’s optics fluttered and dimmed in pleasure, and with a small sigh he reclined more deeply into his seat. Jazz swept his glossa back and forth along the crevasse of the joint, then altered direction and thrust it deeply inward, rocking his whole body into the motion. Some of the watching Decepticons shifted in their seats, becoming aroused by the sight. Soundwave should have looked away, of course, Jazz was right about that much, but instead he stared as if hypnotized.

Helplessly he watched Jazz lick and nibble and thoroughly explore every inch of Megatron’s ankle, watching that glossa tease wires in a way he knew so intimately well. Pleasant memories jarred against the pain now slowly squeezing his spark.

Jazz finished with the ankle joint and exhaled hot vapor against Megatron’s shin plating. In response Megatron parted his legs, knees spread wide. Jazz glided both hands and lips up the length of Megatron’s legs, paused for a little while to tickle and tease the wires in his knee joints, then shifted his own position to get closer. Soundwave fiercely hoped Megatron would decide that was enough, but no luck, for Megatron inched his hips forward in obvious command. Jazz obeyed, nearly burying his face in the iliac joint between Megatron’s hip and thigh struts, glossa stroking the wires there in long and heavy licks. With his right hand he rubbed and fondled the wires on the other side, and Megatron rolled a contented groan down his throat. His was not the only one, for though Soundwave couldn’t tear his optics off the scene he could hear the heavy ventilations of the officers around him, punctuated by small grunts of pleasure and envious sighs. If Jazz heard them too then he gave no sign of it, working away at Megatron’s joint as if the two of them had total privacy. Gently he blew against the wires he’d been moistening and dove in again without restraint. Deeper and deeper he thrust, pushing Megatron’s arousal. Every now and then he would pause, biting sensors just hard enough to force a catch in Megatron’s venting, then lavish more attention on them with his glossa, alternating between pain and pleasure. Megatron’s groans became louder, the heavy rhythm of his ventilations all the more so as he accelerated toward climax. One massive hand clamped over Jazz’s helm, shoving him into Megatron’s thrusting hips, and Soundwave could see Jazz squirm to brace his hands against Megatron’s torso just to keep from being crushed. Megatron’s optics blazed white, and he erupted into overload. Tiny sparks flew out of armor gaps as the extra energy tried to find somewhere to go, and with his mouth still on Megatron’s iliac joint Jazz flinched hard. Soundwave could sympathize; Megatron was a large mech and capable of building up tremendous electricity, which meant a painful shock in the mouth for anyone giving him pleasure this way. Trembling with exhaustion, vents panting, Jazz slumped back to his knees and tried to draw in

clean air.

He was not done, however. Still basking in the glow of his overload, Megatron settled back into his chair and tapped the Decepticon sigil on his chest expectantly. Warily Jazz hauled himself to standing, and pressed an appropriately reverent kiss to the purple symbol.

Only then did Jazz try to back away, but before he could Megatron caught his chin and held him fast. “Beautifully done, Autobot,” he praised. “You really do your best work on your knees, don’t you?”

The other Decepticons snickered, and Megatron let Jazz go with a suddenness that had Jazz collapsing to the floor. “Now clean up that mess, and get me another drink.” He stretched his arms over his head and smiled languidly while Jazz scrambled for a cleaning cloth, his gaze settling on Soundwave. “You are a lucky mech, Soundwave. I’d almost forgotten how good he is.”

Soundwave’s vocalizer nearly locked up on him, but somehow he managed to force out the correct response. “Jazz’s charms, gratefully accepted,” he said, bowing his head, “as token of Lord Megatron’s generosity.”

“Well said. I am indeed generous... to my loyal soldiers.” Meaningfully his gaze lingered on Starscream, who scowled. “Still, I’d hardly blame you for being just a little jealous, just now.”

His tone was light, and teasing, but Soundwave didn’t dare step into that trap. There was a watchful glint in those optics that was not only for Starscream. “Only jealousy, of slave’s talent,” he answered, thinking fast. “This known: Megatron’s response never half so enthusiastic under my own ministrations.”

Megatron’s optics blinked wide with astonishment, as did all the other Decepticons’, before he slapped his knee and roared with laughter. Soundwave was so famously discreet and taciturn that such a racy remark stunned them all into laughing (though he suspected Shockwave’s was rather forced). As a way to break the political tensions that had been brewing, it was a perfect distraction, and his only price was a slightly tarnished reputation that would take a few years to recover. What Jazz thought about it, he didn’t know. His slave had vanished from the platform without Soundwave even seeing him go.

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It was Bluestreak that returned with new drinks for Megatron and the others, by which time the other Decepticons were all laughing and trading grossly exaggerated war stories. Soundwave judged it safe to excuse himself, leaving Buzzsaw perched overhead to alert him if the conversation turned dangerous again. His other aerial directed him upstairs, past a couple of Soundwave’s inattentive servants and up steps that led to a watchers’ walk gracefully encircling the whole ballroom. Niches and alcoves in the wall held various pieces of beautiful artwork or ancient relics. Jazz had found what was probably the most priceless, valuable vase in the entire collection and was currently vomiting his fuel tank’s contents into it, curled over in a permanent kneeling position. In silent commiseration Soundwave dropped one hand onto his helm and stroked it lightly.

Immediately Jazz knocked his hand away, engine revving angrily. “Don’t touch me, Decepticon,” he snarled. “Do you think I need your help? Do you think that was anything new? That I haven’t done the same a thousand times over since the end of the war? What makes you think I need any of

your help now?"

His visor flared hot blue and Soundwave took one step back, allowing Jazz his space. "Anger, not understood. Soundwave did not push Jazz closer to Megatron. That much, Jazz accomplished well enough alone."

"So you're mad." Jazz barked a single, humorless bark of laughter. "Should have guessed. Well, punish me all you like but I won't say sorry. I had to do something; I thought he might kill Aid."

"Anger inaccurate. Confusion, more accurate. Jazz, sacrificed much for sake of other Autobot in spite of hostile treatment from Autobots earlier."

"And *that* would be none of your business," Jazz said venomously. "Percy was just upset about Brawn. I know, I don't get it either, but they've been a thing since Earth. He was... so thrilled when he got transferred here." Soundwave heard the broken sigh from his vents, and watched his shoulders droop. "I didn't even know he'd been sent away again."

"Jazz, worries too much over them."

"Don't be jealous, love, I still got room for you."

"Soundwave, not jealous. Soundwave, only watching Jazz struggle to fight entire Autobot resistance against Decepticon masters, alone, and not understanding why."

"I have to, I'm their officer -"

"Jazz, no officer anymore. Jazz, slave of the Decepticon empire."

"I am their *friend*, a topic you'd know nothing about."

"Other Autobots offer no reciprocal aid," Soundwave observed. "Nor concern for your health and safety, nor gratitude for repeated intervention of Decepticon attentions. Logical conclusion: they are not friends."

A startled, stricken look crossed Jazz's face before he covered it up with a scowl. "You're an aft. Okay, so slavery doesn't bring out the best in them. It doesn't for anyone; trust me, I know. But I still like them. And for as long as I can, I will keep protecting them."

"In spite of fear?"

"I'm not afraid of Megatron."

"Jazz, never tires of lying."

"I'm not!" Jazz pushed himself to his feet, bristling with defiance. "After everything he's put me through, things he's done that you don't even know about yet, you think there's any room left in me to be afraid of him? He's thrown his worst at me already."

"No," Soundwave said with absolute certainty, "he hasn't. Jazz knows this. Always hiding fear behind jokes, distractions... personal services. But fear visible in the way you watch him, the way your hands tremble after every confrontation, flinch when his name spoken. Jazz, ignoring this sensible fear to protect ungrateful Autobots. Why? In hope that Autobots will be more grateful?"

The light in Jazz's visor turned frosty. "I think you've used up your ten sentences for the day. Let's just get back to the party."

He turned and made to walk past Soundwave, but one massive arm blocked his path. “Autobots know you as I know you. Jazz, always ready with smile, but untrustworthy. Insincere. Always lying. Always has ulterior motive. Autobots know you, therefore do not trust you.”

“Stop it! Why are you saying these things, did I make you that angry? I did a *good* thing for you down there, I made you look good for Megatron!”

“Jazz, expecting thanks? For serving own agenda?”

“Well I- I can have two reasons for the things I do.”

“As well known by those who know you.” Soundwave advanced and Jazz backed away, up against the rail that overlooked the party. It might as well have been a million light-years away. “Little wonder that Jazz has no friends.”

“Shut up, that’s not true! You’re just trying to get between us, break up our loyalty to each other.”

“Jazz would know that practice well enough.”

Jazz let slip a guilty twitch, and looked away rather than face Soundwave. “Jazz pretends such fearlessness,” he continued pitilessly. “But terrified of honesty, heard or spoken. Terrified of anything *real*.”

“Get - out - of - *my - head*,” Jazz snarled, and shoved Soundwave back a step. “You can rape my mind all you want, and I’ll deal with that like I have before. But stop trying to pretend you know me, that you understand me. Nobody understands me! I am *Jazz*. I am the greatest spy this planet has ever known, and I got there because no one can ever guess what I’m thinking, or what it is I really want. Not the lawkeepers, not the enemy, and definitely not *you*.”

He punctuated that last poisonous word with an emphatic finger jabbing him in the chest, visor blazing. Though Soundwave was angry too, he moved Jazz’s hand aside calmly. “Jazz, wrong. Jazz, now upset because Soundwave speaking truth. Jazz mine, and Soundwave, a thorough master. My possessions, always known to me.”

“What you are is obsessed with control. You just can’t leave anything alone; everybody has to know that you’re watching. That you’re accounting for every move, ventilation, and thought, that you are nothing less than *God* and will rule our every last moment until the end of time itself. No wonder your first four slaves wanted to kill themselves so bad!”

Soundwave’s hand moved, without any conscious direction, and slapped Jazz hard across the face. The sheer force of it was enough to knock Jazz nearly half over the rail, and his systems violently expelled all air in effort to cope with the blow. He looked no more shocked than Soundwave himself, who did not beat his own symbiotes, not ever. Tackling and pinning Ravage to the ground when Ravage was trying to kill him was the most of what he’d ever done, should ever need to do. Soundwave had always nurtured and protected his charges, never harmed them.

Jazz wiped some bleeding fluid from the inside of his mouth and stared at it, awed. “So that’s what it takes. Well, I had it coming. That was low, even for me.” Wearily he sank to the floor, the anger snuffed out like flame.

“This game,” he sighed, “isn’t fun anymore.”

Soundwave said nothing. Looking down below, he caught the familiar red burn of Megatron’s stare fixed on him. Was he watching? After a second or two Megatron’s attention turned to someone by his side, and Soundwave could not be sure if he’d just happened to look up, or had been watching

them all along.

Jazz's back was slumped against the rail; he hadn't seen. "Can I tell you a secret? Ha, of course I can. You are the universe's keeper of secrets." He smiled wanly when Soundwave looked back to him.

"I have this... thing that I need to confess. About the last battle in the war." If he noticed how Soundwave stiffened, he didn't let on. "The truth is: I wasn't even in it. I ran away before it even started; I was long gone. What kind of soldier does that? But I just had this feeling that I needed to get out - that we needed to get out. The bunker should have been the safest place to be, so that made no sense, but I had the feeling. I told myself at first that I was just scouting a retreat path, that I was going to go back for the others. I was still thinking that when I saw the mushroom cloud go up, and smelled the fire, and knew it was all over. Next thing I knew, Skywarp was on top of me."

Grief pulled at his features, distorting them. "I survived because I ran, Soundwave. When you grow up the way that I had to, you can't help being a survivor. You learn how to lie, cheat, steal, and put yourself first because that's what has to be done. It's not even anything I do on purpose. I wasn't trying to leave them behind; I just had that survivor's instinct and I listened to it. So now here I am, alive instead of dead, living under a roof with the one Decepticon who refuses to hurt his slave, this latest breem notwithstanding." Gingerly he put his fingertips to the shallow dent on his dermal plating.

"I deserve worse than any of them, but I got better. Got luckier. So if I want to push myself a little harder to protect them even a little more - the way Prime would - is that so wrong? Tell me, master, is it so terrible to try and shield them when I can?"

Soundwave stared as Jazz spoke, every word going straight to the knot of tension he'd been carrying within him for orns. Now he could feel it unwinding itself, all the suspicion and fear and paranoid anxieties slipping away like they'd never really meant to be there at all. He looked at the forlorn, huddled slave at his pedes and felt nothing but pity.

Soundwave knelt to face him directly. "Jazz, not wrong. However, must learn to listen to own advice. This often said: fate of Cassetibots not my fault. That Soundwave must move past guilt. Will Jazz not do the same?"

His logic was irrefutable, and he watched Jazz blink a few times while trying to process it. "But, my friends..."

"Burdens that cause Jazz suffering. Soundwave, offering comfort."

"I can't just turn away from -"

"Other slaves, already turned away from Jazz. This much, made clear. But Soundwave, still present. Still desires to see Jazz happy. Jazz, not happy in my home, with casseticons?"

"Now that's just not fair," Jazz whispered.

"Fairness irrelevant. Jazz, not strong enough to endure anymore alone. Jazz, not even a little tired?"

Jazz was starting to shake, the small tremors visible in his hands and neck cables as he struggled to keep control. "Maybe a little. But I can't just stop, Soundwave, you don't understand, you've never been a slave -"

"Jazz, deserves easier life."

“Maybe so, but I can’t -”

“Jazz, wants easier life?”

“Yes, damnit!” Jazz wailed, voice cracking in exhausted frustration. “Of course I do. But I can’t. I can’t give in, I can’t stop fighting. If I do that, then it’s really all over. I’ll have nothing.”

“Jazz, wrong. Jazz will have me.” Tenderly Soundwave cupped Jazz’s face in his hands. “Jazz mine. And Soundwave, *yours*.”

Jazz’s mouth fell partly open, out of surprise or because he was trying to form a response, Soundwave wasn’t sure. “Pain, guilt, and pointless struggles must be forgotten. What you have now, more important. In spite of untrustworthy character, in spite of fear of honesty, in spite of all these things, Soundwave yours forever.”

His mask clicked open and he tipped forward, pressing a gentle kiss to Jazz’s parted lips. He restrained himself, only offering comfort, not seeking to dominate. Jazz did not resist him, but he did not participate either, and so Soundwave withdrew. Or he tried to, anyway; as soon as he moved to retreat Jazz made a muffled noise of protest and pushed forward to keep the connection. Now it became Jazz’s kiss, lonely and sad and desperate to never let go. Jazz clung to Soundwave like he had no one else in this world, because he didn’t, and Soundwave did not dissuade him. He held him close, and let Jazz kiss him for as long as he wanted.

When Jazz finally pulled away, he sighed and let his head fall against Soundwave’s chest armor. “I am tired,” he mumbled. “Won’t admit it to anyone but you, but I am tired. And you... you just won’t stop being there, no matter which way I turn, ready and waiting to be leaned on. Why must you make it so easy?”

“Because Soundwave, loyal. Jazz knows this.” Soundwave traced an affectionate fingertip down the line of Jazz’s jaw. “Consideration, enough endured here tonight. Jazz, ready for home?”

“We can go? Megatron won’t be mad?”

“Unlikely. Soundwave, always first to depart any celebration.” It was the way things had been for centuries, and he doubted Megatron would mind or even be remotely surprised. As for Shockwave, he would probably be invited back to Headquarters before the end of the night. Soundwave’s work here was done.

“Jazz, ready to leave?”

“I want to go, but I can’t, not yet. Let me say goodnight to them, please?” He saw the look on Soundwave’s face and hurried to add, “I can’t leave things like this, I just- I have to try and set things right. Won’t you let me at least try?”

Soundwave had no interest in allowing Jazz to repair the relationship between himself and the other slaves, but to deny him would only generate pointless resentment. Better to at least let him say his goodbyes. It would probably be a long time before Jazz saw any of his fellow Autobots again.

“Formal farewells to Megatron and Shockwave must be made. You have that much time.”

“Yes, I understand. Thank you.” Jazz scrambled to standing and fled the watcher’s walk, Laserbeak already pinged and moving to join him.

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Once again Laserbeak tumbled off Jazz's shoulder when he entered the servants' room, returning to her vantage point. Some of the Autobots looked up at Jazz, then away again, intent on their various tasks. Jazz's gaze moved past most of them and settled on the two Protectobots, seeking comfort from each other in the corner. Groove was kneeling by the huddled form of First Aid, dabbing a salve on the vicious dent in his brother's dermal plating, and they both glanced up at Jazz's approach.

"Hey Aid," Jazz greeted softly, his voice low-pitched and gentle. He knelt before them both and rapped the back of his hand against First Aid's knee joint. "How ya doin'?"

"He's fine," Groove answered crisply. "And we'd like to be alone. You can go now."

"Groove, don't be like that," protested First Aid. "Jazz saved me tonight."

"Well he didn't save *me*. We can't always look to Jazz to take care of us now, he's made that clear enough."

The blue in his optics was like crushed ice when he glared at Jazz, before turning his attention back on his task. Jazz's vents let out a tiny sigh, but he didn't try to argue. "Aid, what happened back there with Megatron? I know how hard you work to stay under his radar; it's not like you to get the wrong end of that fist. Did you say anyth -"

The doors burst open, and Starscream blew into the room with his usual obnoxious fanfare. "On your pedes, slaves! One of your gracious masters is present!"

Most of the Autobots were in fact already standing, but hastily everyone else jumped up or dropped what they were doing, standing respectfully – if resentfully – at attention. Jazz was slower than most, but wearily he pushed himself to standing too.

"A little faster, Jazz," Starscream tsked. "What's the matter, are you hungry? Need to go eat something out of Soundwave's hand?" He smirked and waited expectantly, but Jazz just looked at him in weary silence. "What's this? No witty comebacks tonight?"

"What, I got to do it on command now?"

"I don't know, isn't that how you Autobots always do it?" Starscream purred, right on cue, and smiled when he saw the look on Jazz's face. "I'd say you proved that well enough tonight. The Autobots' highest ranking whore proves once again that he has well earned those stripes."

He traced a languid finger down the broad blue racing stripe on Jazz's chest, which Jazz knocked away in short order. "You know, Starscream, just because Shockwave's scrapin' his way back up the Decepticon ladder and Megatron's shippin' your fanbase off to Earth is no reason to take your bad mood out on me."

This time it was Jazz's turn to smile while Starscream bristled. "One witty comeback, as requested. Now then, did you need something?"

"Just Perceptor. Unless you want to throw yourself in front of him too, that is. I'm up for it."

Helplessly Jazz slid a sideways glance at the watching Laserbeak. "Can't say that's a possibility tonight."



“Of course.” Starscream hadn’t missed that look, and knew just as well as Jazz that he was in no position to accept. “Soundwave’s waiting, and he’s not the type to share. He’s more the ‘lock your slaves away and don’t let anyone see them, ever’ type. He probably didn’t enjoy your little show at all, did he? Shame. But, that’s our Soundwave: always hating a good time. Come, slave.”

He beckoned to Perceptor, who for once did not meekly scurry to his master’s side but remained stock still with a quizzical expression on his face. “Slaves?” he repeated, uncertainly.

Jazz tensed, anxiety flashing white across his visor before the optical glow took on a lush, inviting blue. “You know what? Forget Soundwave.” Hastily he circled between Starscream and Perceptor, slipping his hand around Starscream’s wrist, trying to turn him towards the door. “He’s already pouting about me and Megatron anyway, so what’s one more? Shall we... go somewhere more private?”

Taken aback, Starscream didn’t budge, and Perceptor took a step forward. “He said ‘them’, I heard him. Jazz, you’re the only of us with Soundwave, right?”

“Only one!” Jazz assured him, almost frantically tugging at Starscream’s arm now. He winced when Starscream’s hand clamped down hard on Jazz’s wrist, trapping it in a vicelike grip.

“They don’t know,” Starscream said slowly, a terrible gleam of understanding settling itself in his optics. “Do they? But you do.”

“Know what?” asked Groove.

“Did Soundwave actually tell you about it?” Starscream continued. “Funny, he’s spent all this time acting like it never even happened.”

“Like what happened?” pressed Hoist, and Jazz snapped, “Nothing!”

“You little liar.” Starscream wasn’t letting go of Jazz’s wrist, and now he leaned closer to grasp his chin. “Why keep it from them, Jazz? It’s not a secret. All the Decepticons know. Don’t you want your friends to know the truth?”

*“Khaleena nihki ala ghair shi,”* Jazz pleaded in rapid Arabic, Starscream’s favorite Earth language. *“Drop it now and I promise I will find a way to say thank you - “*

“Jazz!” Perceptor nearly shouted, exasperated.

“What he’s trying not to admit,” Starscream drawled, “is that he was not Soundwave’s first Autobot pet. Didn’t you ever wonder what happened to your comm tech’s little cassettes? Soundwave took the four of them home, and that’s the last anyone saw of them.”

“What?” gasped several of the Autobots, disbelief and dismay flashing around the room. Jazz’s shoulders slumped, and he tore his chin out of Starscream’s grasp in disgust. “Steeljaw, and the others?” First Aid whispered. “They’re... dead? But -”

“You told us they’d got away!” Perceptor finished for him, accusing glare turned back on Jazz.

“I said I thought *maybe* they *might* have escaped,” Jazz corrected tersely. “We were still in prison at the time, I didn’t know. I didn’t find out what really happened until after I went to live with Soundwave.”

“He murdered them?”

“No!”

“Then how did they die?”

Perceptor took another step towards Jazz, armor bristling aggressively. Looking pleased with himself and ready to enjoy the show, Starscream backed away and helped himself to a flute of sparkling high grade.

“They got sick,” Jazz tried to explain. “It was their systems, they couldn’t handle Blaster’s deactivation. Soundwave tried to help them.”

“Sure he did,” Perceptor said flatly. “I’m sure that Decepticon worried himself to a shadow trying to nurse them.”

“He did! He did everything he could!”

“Jazz, you weren’t even there.”

“He told me.”

“And you *believed* him?”

“Of course I believe him,” Jazz answered promptly, looking halfway surprised to even be asked. “Soundwave doesn’t lie.”

“Could you *stop being in love with him* for just one nanoklik?” Perceptor exploded. “Could you stop and remember that you’re supposed to be on *our side*?”

“It’s not about sides, Percy! They were under his care, and he did everything under the stars that a mech could ever do to keep those four little bots ticking. *It devastated* him, that they didn’t make it.”

Jazz’s voice nearly broke on the word, visor blaring hot blue with emotion. Too late he remembered who else was in the room, and darted a quick and helpless look at the smirking Starscream. Damage already done, he shuttered his visor and forced an exhale.

“He’s a carrier model,” he tried again, struggling to keep his voice even. “It’s part of his platform programming. He wanted to save them; he tried. Just... trust me on this.”

“Trust?” Perceptor echoed scathingly. “*You*? Why should we? You knew about this, and you didn’t even tell us!”

“I never had a chance!”

“You were in the medbay for over twenty cycles when Megatron broke your arm,” First Aid pointed out. “You could have told me. You could have told me any time, but all you talked about was getting back to Soundwave’s home.”

Jazz huffed in frustration. “It’s... not the easiest news to share. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Easier to just forget it happened and dive back into Soundwave’s berth, right?”

The light in Jazz’s visor narrowed and sharpened. “Scuse me, fellow bots, but I went to a lot of trouble to uncover the truth about what happened to Blaster’s mechs. Don’t think I’m not bothered by what happened, but I guarantee you Soundwave didn’t want it to end the way it did.”

“Well he got you,” Perceptor said, his voice hard and bitter. “And you both seem happy enough

with that, so I'd say he's fine now. If you're so worried, why don't you take your flying friend over there and go back to him already?"

"Because we're not finished here."

"Yes, we are. Get out." He punctuated the order with a light shove against Jazz's shoulder, clearly an unexpected action going by the shocked look on Jazz's face.

"Percy, don't -"

Perceptor tried to push Jazz again, this time more forcefully, and faster than vision itself Jazz had him flat on his back on the floor. Everyone in the room jumped, horrified, except for the giggling Starscream. Perceptor looked blank with astonishment, so abruptly had he gone from vertical to horizontal, and unsure of what Jazz had done to put him there. He'd forgotten, as so many had since the end of the war, Jazz's long history of lethal combat in the shadows. A nasty gleam flickered across that visor, hinting at long-ago throat cable cuttings and optics gouged from their sockets, and Perceptor cowered when Jazz leaned over his prey.

He did nothing further, though, beyond giving Perceptor a hard look and then turning away. A room full of wide blue optics met his gaze, full of fear and distrust. Jazz turned away from them too, beckoning for Laserbeak to perch on his arm, then threw one last glance at the frozen First Aid.

"Ask Hook."

It was the last thing he said before pushing open the doors and leaving the room. Fingers buried themselves in the fine plating of Laserbeak's plumage, seeking comfort, his hands already visibly shaking. His steps devoured the length of the halls at rapid clip, getting himself as far from the other Autobots as possible, before he found a recessed corner without traffic or witnesses. There he sank to the floor, smothered his face in Laserbeak's wings, and began to keen. When Soundwave approached him half a breem later, following Laserbeak's summons, he did not look up.

"Just take me home," he whispered. "Quick. Before I cause any more disasters."

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Laserbeak didn't want to go. She'd been willing enough to dock within Soundwave for the flight home, so that Soundwave could know what happened, but now that she'd been ejected again she only wanted to return to Jazz's arms - something about being his date until the clock struck midnight. He soothed her concerns and nudged her back to the balcony. He wanted to be alone with Jazz now; moreover, he needed all his symbiotes monitoring the party for as long as it lasted. She wasn't happy about it, but at least she acceded and took reluctant flight. Meanwhile Jazz was still sitting on the berth where he'd left him, a lump of unmoving misery, and Soundwave fetched a soaked cloth. Jazz's plating had become feverishly hot from the strain of his keening systems, and tenderly Soundwave patted the cool cloth against his armor.

"-d you hear all that noise?" Jazz mumbled, as Soundwave swept it over his dermal plating.

"Laserbeak, recording. Heard and saw entire exchange."

"Then you must be fallin' apart too, sit down alrea-"

"Hush," Soundwave interrupted, still intent on his task. "Right now, Jazz more in need of care."

“Hn.” Jazz did not resist, slouching deeper into his depression. “Sorry I tipped your hand to Starscream, and after I lectured you about it, too. He’ll probably try to make a play with that later.”

“Will be handled.”

“And I’m sorry about what they said. They don’t know you the way I do, and they don’t have reason to expect much of Decepticons. Can you blame them, really, for not believing?”

“Autobots’ opinion, of no concern to me.”

“Guess I can’t say the same.” His systems wheezed as his vents struggled to draw in clear air. “I-I just couldn’t walk away, you know? I didn’t want them to go into recharge tonight thinking that you killed those little bots, because you didn’t and it’s not fair. They should know that you tried; they should know that it *hurt* you.” He lifted a hand to Soundwave’s chest glass and kept it there, fingertips spread over the surface. Then, for the first time since they’d taken flight from the mansion, he looked Soundwave right in the optics.

“Did you love them?”

Somewhere under Jazz’s hand, Soundwave’s spark twisted. It was an answer he didn’t even have to think about, but it hurt nonetheless to say it aloud.

“Negative,” he said, bluntly as the question had been asked, and thought he saw a ghost of disappointment cross Jazz’s face. “Acquisitions, too new. Bonds, not yet formed. Cassettibots, not yet symbiotes but mere possessions at time of deactivation.” He hesitated, then added, “But consideration: such feelings possible, eventually. If cassetibots had accepted me, allowed me to provide for and shelter them. Given me chance. If, in alternate circumstances, these things happened, then probable answer to your question: affirmative.”

Jazz swallowed and nodded. His hands were still shaking, and Soundwave gathered him up more securely into his arms before settling himself on the berth. Jazz did not try to move, a listless mess on his lap, and didn’t seem to notice Soundwave’s gentle strokes across his plating. This close, he felt the arrhythmic flow of his ventilations, and the tremors still running through his frame. Not even after Megatron’s savage beating had he seen Jazz keen so hard. The only other night he could think of that came close was the first night Jazz himself learned the truth. How could someone so good at pretending never to care be in so much pain?

His petting was having no effect. Soundwave considered other ways he’d comforted his symbiotes in the past and tried something else; very, very gently, he initiated a low thumping bass in his speakers. It was so low it almost couldn’t be heard, merely felt. The vibrations traveled through his frame and into the berth beneath him, holding a perfect steady beat.

At first Jazz showed no reaction, still a sniffling huddle on his lap. But there was no way he could not feel it, sprawled across Soundwave like he was, and gradually his wheezing tapered away. The sobs subsided, his ventilations evened, and eventually he was resting quietly on Soundwave’s leg struts. Satisfied, Soundwave switched off his speakers, and immediately Jazz tensed.

“Don’t,” he whispered. “Don’t stop that, please. It feels good.”

Hastily Soundwave reinitiated the subroutine, upping the volume by a notch and changing to a different tempo. Jazz hummed softly deep in his vocalizer along with it, picking himself up off Soundwave’s lap but still showing no inclination to move away. Instead he crawled into a straddling position, draping himself over Soundwave’s torso speakers. The warmth of his body curled cozily against Soundwave, almost as soothing for him as he was trying to be for Jazz, and without thinking

about it his arms encircled him. Why didn't he try this a long time ago? He should have realized what an effect it would have on Jazz, loving music like he did- he might have liked sooner- that is-

Soundwave's thoughts fragmented when he realized Jazz was kissing him, slow and deep as the vibrations still reverberating through their frames. Expert fingertips stroked the wires exposed in his own shoulder joints, drawing up small sizzles of energy. Distantly, Soundwave recalled that Jazz had been doing the same for Megatron hardly more than a joor earlier, but that didn't seem important anymore, not with their bodies pressed so close together and Jazz sighing into their kiss with soft contentment. Then he did something unexpected; the engine in his chest kicked into a low and steady thrum that nearly matched Soundwave's subroutine for bass and pitch. A motor engine was not something any of his cassettes possessed, but the obsolete model of Ravage's vocalizer produced a similar kind of vibration when Soundwave lavished sufficient physical attention upon him; in other words, Jazz was *purring*.

So close, he felt rather than saw Jazz's grin at his surprise. The purr rose and fell slightly in pitch, echoing the pace of their kiss. Experimentally, Soundwave tried adjusting the tempo through his speakers, and Jazz's revving echoed the change, one deep vibration pushing against the other. He could feel them in every part of his body, every strut, node, and thinnest of wires buzzing pleasantly against one another. Jazz's light stroking didn't get any more erotic, nor did it need to, not with all this going on inside of him. The effort of sitting upright became too much bother, and he let himself fall back onto the berth, Jazz now sprawled atop him. His armor plating pressed against Soundwave's speakers, ventilations speeding up again, but in a way that was alright this time, and more than welcome. Primus, his slave really loved this sensation, he'd never seen the glow in Jazz's visor turn such a deep blue, or heard him panting quite so desperately. He changed the tempo again, keeping the low bass but thumping at a faster pace, and Jazz swallowed a moan. His engine's purr followed immediate suit, every rev sending fresh shivers through Soundwave's frame. It was a feeling he would have wallowed in forever, if such a thing were possible, but he could feel himself falling into overload already. He didn't even consider resisting it, and for the first time, neither did Jazz. Through a haze of static in his vision he saw that visor flash white and then pure black, plumes of tiny gold sparks erupting from every exposed joint. Then Soundwave succumbed to his own overload, while Jazz collapsed limply over his frame.

They didn't move. To move would reactivate traditional motion hydraulics, and all the pleasant ghosting memories of vibrations running through their bodies would be erased. Drifting into a stunned daze, Soundwave replayed the sensations and visions in his mind. Jazz had never allowed himself to go over that edge before; said no Decepticon could do that to him for all he was willing to do to them. True, it wasn't an actual interface between their two bodies, but it was more than Soundwave had ever gotten before. More, he suspected, than any Decepticon had ever gotten before.

"They were wrong," Jazz whispered into his plating. "They should have lived, should have given you that chance. You deserved it."

He subsided into silence, and then the oblivion of full recharge. Those words still circling in his head, Soundwave followed him soon enough.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on hangovers again

“Shockwave,” Jazz declared, “throws terrible parties.”

Soundwave’s vision came online to find Jazz still sprawled on top of him, chin resting on his folded up arms as he stared at the mech beneath him. It was the first time in a long time that Soundwave could remember Jazz waking up before he did, and going by the steady hum in his systems he’d been that way for a while. He grinned down at him and continued, “I mean, the decorations were juvenile. The buffet, paltry. And to no one’s - I’m sure - surprise, our premier managed to collect all the worst music in Cybertron’s long history with which to abuse our audios throughout the night. It’s also left you with a couple of filthy souvenirs.”

He tilted his head to the floor of the room, where Rumble and Frenzy were sprawled across the floor in an undignified drunken stupor. “Not to mention, for all the parties I’ve attended in my life – and trust me when I tell you there have been a *lot* – I don’t think I’ve ever left one so early. So that was, without doubt, the worst party I’ve ever been to. Shall you tell him, or I?”

So this was to be how he struggled to cope with the night he’d endured. Not all that surprised, Soundwave took Jazz’s glib chatter in his stride and answered without pause.

“Shockwave, less interested in appeal of party than final results.”

Which, from that single opticked perspective, would be an unqualified success. The reports from the twins, at least before they collapsed into their current position, said that Megatron had stayed late into the night, laughing often, drinking more, and that for a brief while had even retired upstairs with Shockwave’s Chromia. Soundwave did not share this information with Jazz. Whatever expense Shockwave had gone to, whatever damage had been done to his mansion by reveling commoners, he would consider it worth it just to be back in Megatron’s good graces. Knowing him, he was probably back at the office already.

“Yes well,” Jazz said perkily, “he’s got Megatron’s favor back and I hope he chokes on it. It’s as much as he deserves for hiring such an incompetent deejay.”

“Jazz, intending to stay in current position? Twins should be moved to berth.”

“But I’m comfortable.” Jazz resettled himself against Soundwave’s frame with a little squirm, a not unpleasant sensation for Soundwave by any means. “You’re warm.”

“Comfort, happily provided. However, twins should be collected. Their current positions, exacerbating future joint ache.”

“So worried, even when you know how determined they were to get me in trouble last night.”

“Affirmative.” Still Jazz did not move. Every morning since the night he’d won Jazz and he’d never once managed to wake up with him in his arms; now he couldn’t get his slave to budge. Soundwave looked harder, and thought he saw something behind Jazz’s easy grin. “Jazz.”

“Let’s not wake them up. They need their rest.”

“Jazz, afraid to wake them?”

“No!” The denial came quickly, the hesitation promptly after. “I mean- they do know. Right? L.B. was there, so I’m guessing they all... know.”

“Affirmative,” Soundwave said again, stroking one hand over Jazz’s plating. “But fear unnecessary. Symbiotes, unlikely to blame Jazz.”

“Who’s afraid?” Jazz scoffed, pushing himself partly upright. “I’m just fragged off as all the pit at Starscream. How many ways can a mech screw up a party, anyway? Not only did he utterly fail to ruin Shockwave’s night, he then saw fit to ruin mine for no good reason. Just when I think that Seeker’s hit his lowest, he went and did what I thought was impossible: bumped himself up to one notch above Shockwave on my To Do List.”

“Jazz will refrain from making threats on Decepticons.”

“Tell me you’re not just a little bit miffed. It was your business- *our* business. He had no right to go smearing it around like it was so much dirty oil.”

Soundwave was, actually, quite displeased, but the damage had been inflicted and there was no undoing it now. “At this time, Starscream not my concern.”

“Then what is?”

Soundwave said nothing, simply looked at Jazz, and Jazz knew him well enough to understand.

“I’m gonna go get some coolant,” he announced. “They’re going to need it soon enough anyway, we both know that, and this time you can be the one that gets thrown up on when you try to move them.” At last he tried to slide off Soundwave, and this time it was Soundwave that held him back.

“Jazz, describe status.”

“Surprisingly well rested, actually. That was some lullaby you played to me last night.” He flashed a coy grin, which Soundwave ignored.

“Physical status, reported. Now, emotional status.”

“Soundwave... don’t be such a worryweld. I know that I must have looked a wreck, but it was a long night and I was tired. Do you really think that Autobots have never argued? It might not escalate to the homicidal levels so frequently attained by Megatron and Starscream, but even us rainbow-loving, puppy-hugging Autobots do occasionally air our differences. They’re mad at me now, but I’m not worried. They’ll come around.”

Soundwave studied Jazz, and released the grip on his arm. “Fetch coolant.”

“Yessir.”

Soundlessly he slithered off Soundwave and onto the floor, weaving gracefully between the sprawled casseticons to exit the room. The door slid shut behind him and Frenzy, who’d been awake for a while now, looked up at Soundwave.

“Boss,” he croaked. “Last night. What happened?”

“Laserbeak’s recording, shared with all symbiotes. Jazz’s part in revelation, unintentional -”

“Not that,” Frenzy said impatiently, while Soundwave did his best to scoop him gently off the floor. “Starscream’s a prick and we all knew it. But afterwards - what happened? Because we know something *happened*.” He pressed his hand to Soundwave’s chest, directly over his spark. “Here. Something’s different.”

Something was different, but Soundwave did not have the words to explain to his symbiote exactly

what. He covered Frenzy's hand with his own and moved it aside, as he settled his small cassette on the berth.

"Perhaps, too soon to say. Right now, my concern more for Jazz."

"Sounds okay to me," Frenzy mumbled, a tad enviously, pressing the heel of his hand against what was likely a painful neural ache.

"Affirmative. And over course of careful study, Soundwave learned one thing."

"Whazzthat?"

"The more casual his tone of voice, the more likely Jazz lying."

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The twins woke, then later passed out again, and neither had still managed to move from the berth by the time Ravage returned later in the cycle, his data tracks full of surveillance and his end of the link full of anxiety. The knowledge, he reported, that Megatron was now shipping minor criminals to his Earth labor camp was already racing back and forth across Iacon. It had taken hardly any effort to trace the source of the rumors back to Starscream, who was clearly wasting no time in broadcasting the information as fast as his mouth could move. There hadn't been an overt public reaction yet, at least not that Ravage or the aerials had seen, but it made Soundwave's spark thud with apprehension for what long term damage might have been done. Add to that the grumbling resentment of the population half that didn't even get invited to the party in the first place, and the city was suddenly looking the most unstable it had been since the market riots. It would not improve when the news of Shockwave's return to power spread. Soundwave had the sinking feeling that this troublesome party had just traded away one problem in exchange for several more. What was it Jazz once said? The better the party, the bigger the hangover?

Speaking of the city's commoners, he'd tasked Ravage with another chore just before the party, and expectantly he summoned the results now. Rather than transforming back into alt mode, however, Ravage ducked his head in awkward embarrassment. It seemed that the designated target was... not yet found.

Soundwave stared at his most reliable symbiote in blank disbelief. "Clarify meaning, 'not yet found.' Locations of employment and residence both provided."

Yes, and it should have been easy for an expert spy like Ravage to locate and shadow that civilian simpleton - him and his ridiculously flashy paintjob. It *should* have been the easiest task Soundwave had ever given him. Should have, but Ravage's long tail was whipping back and forth with frustration and he still would not look Soundwave in the optic. He had thoroughly investigated the refinery, from the factory floor to the most closely guarded central repositories, but there was no sign of the target.

"Employment, terminated?"

Ravage indicated that no, that was not the case. Overheard conversations and questions confirmed that the supervisors and coworkers were just as puzzled by his absence. The cohabitators of his flat, a ragged and unexceptional cell in one of Iacon's worst ghettos, were equally bemused. Nobody knew where he'd gone, and nobody else seemed to much care. Their target had vanished like ash in the wind.



While Soundwave was trying to process this, Ravage pressed for more details. He had never been told why he was sent to investigate, and wanted to know if this young mech was suspected of dissent.

“Negative,” Soundwave answered reluctantly. “Mission, object of curiosity.” He was still unable to explain why this commoner bothered him, and had hoped that after a little surveillance the reason would show itself. He hadn’t had any idea what to expect, but that the target was *missing* was the last thing he’d been prepared to hear.

Trying to tamp down the unease this new information had churned up, Soundwave then realized he had yet another problem. Unless he’d forgotten, Megatron had plans to summon this young mech to his personal quarters. If he could not find him, he would turn to Soundwave, and he would not be pleased that Soundwave had no answers. Subjects of Megatron’s empire were not allowed to simply disappear from his city. But if Soundwave went to him now then, in that frustratingly inconsistent way of his, Megatron would demand to know why he’d opened an investigation. Soundwave would not have any answers for that either.

Ravage’s ears flicked back at the surge of exasperation that rolled off Soundwave. This was a mess he didn’t need, and instinctively he ordered Ravage to devote all resources to a total mech-hunt, to be initiated immediately and not ceased until the target was found. Ravage promptly countered that his current surveillance duties were all he could handle, and he was, of course, quite right. Their burden of surveillance had only ever grown since the day Megatron saw that Autobot graffiti on his statue, and nothing that had happened since, from occasional dissenters to the riots themselves, encouraged Soundwave to believe it was safe to relax it. Again he thought of Starscream, and swallowed a small groan. Soundwave and his team were simply stretched too thin already.

Ravage was asking for clarification of priorities. “Current duties, a priority,” Soundwave confirmed. Maybe, just maybe, Megatron would forget all about it anyway and it would never become a problem. Maybe. “However, keep alert for evidence of target. His current whereabouts, and activities, of great interest to me.”

He tagged this particular command to be distributed to all his symbiotes, including a downloaded image of the mech and any thus-far accumulated information. Then he decided he was sick of thinking about all these problems and indulged in a little scratching behind Ravage’s audial components. Ravage relaxed into the attention, a contented growl circulating in his vocalizer, head resting on Soundwave’s knee joint. This was the peace they allowed themselves, just a little now and then, in the gaps between their unending work. It was pleasant, but never lasted very long.

Eventually Ravage stirred, preparing for transformation. It seemed there was, after all, one recording he’d collected that he felt Soundwave should see. Obliging Soundwave opened his chest, and allowed him in.

*As the cubes dwindled off the tables, Shockwave’s party was growing more raucous. Lights were dimmer, the noise level louder, pairs or trios of mechs finding what corners they could for an intoxicated interface. Ravage watched as Hook hustled First Aid into a shadowy nook, ignoring a couple of combat-models writhing together on the floor, and whacked him hard on the head.*

*“Now, you’re gonna tell me exactly what idiotic thing you said that nearly got you slagged tonight. What, you think you’re Jazz now? Mouthing off to Megatron in front of the whole world and hoping you can get away with it?”*

*“No master, it wasn’t like that,” First Aid pleaded in protest. “I wasn’t trying to be insolent, I swear. I never meant to say anything that would make him angry!”*

*“Then I’d say ‘mission: extreme failure’,” Hook retorted. “Alright, what did you say then?”*

*"Your hands."*

*"What?"*

*Helplessly First Aid shrugged. "I was serving him his drink when I saw burn scars on his palms; they looked horribly painful. I was so surprised that I just said 'Oh, your hands!' without thinking. I would have treated them if he wanted, but then he hit me to the floor." He shuddered and swallowed a small whimper at the memory. "I was terrified. I don't know why he got so angry; I was only trying to help."*

*Hook listened with no change in his expression, but Ravage glimpsed a thoughtful flicker in his optics. To his slave, he just grunted disdainfully.*

*"Uh-huh. And are you Megatron's personal medic?"*

*"No, master Hook."*

*"Did he ask for your medical advice?"*

*"No." First Aid ducked his head, and Hook grasped his chin and forced him to look up again. A slim light beam lit up on his shoulder so he could better examine the dent on First Aid's face.*

*"Then next time, mind your own bumperswax and just give him his drink. If Lord Megatron decides he wants you to see to some minor battle injury, he'll let you know."*

*"But that wasn't -"*

*"Did I ask you to argue?"*

*"No, master. I'm sorry."*

*"Good kid." Not quite as roughly as he could have, Hook finished dabbing some salve on his slave's face and stepped back. "Now, don't ever embarrass me like that again. Time to go rejoin the party, eh?" He turned away, but First Aid did not move.*

*"Wait, master, may I ask you a question? It's... about something else."*

*"Make it quick."*

*"Is it true that- that Blaster's cassettibots were given to Soundwave at the end of the war?"*

*Immediately Hook tensed, stiffened struts visible even in the meager light. "Where did you hear that?"*

*"Starscream," First Aid said softly. "And Jazz."*

*"And what's it to you?"*

*"Please, master. Starscream said they died in Soundwave's custody. Do you know what happened?"*

*"That's a confidential case between patient and medic, Aid. And Soundwave's given me direct orders to keep that particular file classified."*

*"I understand, master. I won't ask for medical details. I only want to know if what Jazz said is true; if Soundwave did try to keep the cassettibots alive."*

*Hook hesitated, rightly fearing the security director's wrath for any breach of trust. But he wasn't going to leave First Aid's question unanswered, either. "Well, he called me in, didn't he? Do I enjoy failing?"*

*First Aid's mouth opened but no sound came out, and Hook shook off the topic with a determined turn back to the party. "Now come on, I'm missing out on the good drinks."*

*He marched away, and his slave trotted after.*

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"What is loyalty?"

Indeed, what. Soundwave's mind picked at the question with new curiosity, wondering.

Soundwave knew what loyalty was, was sparked for it really, but now he paused to consider why it existed. Was loyalty owed from one mech to another? Or simply given? Earned? Throughout the long war, and the years since its end, did Jazz earn the loyalty of the Autobots he'd worked so hard to protect? If so, then those Autobots abandoned their owed loyalty to Jazz right when he needed it the most. But even as that loyalty died, others stayed strong. From the doorway of his office, the next day, he'd watched his casseticons drag Jazz inside from moping out on the balcony, watched the twins force him to endure a terrible human movie while they jeered at it and clambered over his body to ensure he couldn't get away. In spite of himself, by the end of the joor Jazz was laughing.

He didn't need the loyalty of his Autobots, in the end, but maybe that's because his own loyalties had begun to shift. Though if that were true, maybe the Autobots never owed their loyalty to him in the first place. So much changing, after all these long vorns - could anything so impermanent be called 'loyalty' at all?

"What is loyalty?" Megatron asked again, the lights of Iacon slanting across his office and drawing sharp lines across his gray armor. "Is it so difficult to find, on this planet? So easy to lose, in such a short time? Is there any of it left in that miserable, ungrateful city at all? I won a *war* for them. I saved their lives!"

A single fist slammed into the surface of his desk and Soundwave kept from jumping, prepared by long experience with Megatron's outbursts. Beside him, Shockwave kept himself just as carefully still. By now they had all seen Soundwave's reports. More surveillance was flooding in than he could barely process, so much dissent overheard that his symbiotes barely knew which way to turn for eavesdropping. Datapads full of it covered Megatron's desk, all of them packed with incriminating sedition. Soundwave could not bring himself to face Megatron when he turned it over.

It was the only time in his long service with the Decepticons that he could remember despising his volume of work.

"These reports, distressing," he managed, when Megatron's stare made it clear that respectful silence was no longer enough. "However, cause apparent. Widespread knowledge of non-Autobots' deportation to Earth inciting general fear and mistrust in city. Megatron's admission of this policy in public... perhaps not wisely timed."

"I am the emperor," Megatron snarled. "I *admit* to nothing. I only *declare* what is, and is not."

"But the city is angry, my lord," Shockwave almost whispered.

"Let them be angry. I will show them that I can be angrier."

“And Starscream? Your unhappy subjects are turning to him for inspiration now, calling him the better leader- silly nonsense and lies, of course,” he added hastily when Megatron’s cannon arm tensed. “But it is what they say. You can ship them to Earth or give them whatever punishment you deem fit, but what is to be done about Starscream?”

Megatron paused by his largest window, his gaze moving to the city’s skyline. More specifically, on the tall tower in the distance that housed the seekers.

“Perhaps... he is past his most useful days, after all.”

Shockwave’s optic brightened hopefully, but Soundwave felt only dread. “Seeker airforce, substantial portion of Decepticon military,” he reminded them. “Seekers will follow Starscream, always. Loss of their force, affordable?”

“We don’t need the airforce,” Shockwave hissed, Shockwave who had promised him future support in exchange for his help, but of course that loyalty was already forgotten. “We can recruit replacements, and the planet will have peace. He’s the one who gets the population riled up, claiming to speak for the lowest commoners, pushing them to show defiance and disrespect. If he’s gone, then so are our problems!”

“This, too much a simplification.”

“What would you have me do, Soundwave?” Megatron asked, his optics hard but his voice low. “I know what this could mean for the planet. But should I keep him in my fold forever, always looking the other way when he defies me, only to be looking away the one time he finally puts a knife through my back plating?”

Soundwave hesitated to answer. Starscream owed his loyalty to Megatron, as did they all. But Megatron owed his loyalty to Starscream too, who had changed the course of their revolution with his seeker airforce, who had consistently brought aerial advantage over the Autobot forces. They were all bound to one another, after all this time. Everything they had now they had because they had fought together, fought *for* one another. But one of those prizes was the loyalty of their race, and that loyalty had crumbled away to nothing in so little time. Megatron wanted it back, but Soundwave didn’t think ending Starscream would do it. What is loyalty? Loyalty was all Soundwave had ever known, and he knew well enough that whatever it was, it could not be taken by force.

Megatron was still waiting for an answer. Soundwave unlocked his vocalizer and tried to find the right words. “Starscream, provided invaluable aid to Decepticon cause. But also, extremely dangerous. This decision can only be yours.”

Of course, it could only ever be Megatron’s choice. Both of them watched his gaze turn thoughtful, considering everything that Starscream had ever done - for and against him, and everything that Starscream might ever do - for and against him. He thought long and hard, and at long last opened his mouth.

Which was the very moment that his desk console blazed to life, signaling an urgent message. It was from Earth.

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There was no pause for the rest of the work cycle, after that. For Soundwave the joors passed in a

blur of furious shouting, hasty meetings, terse debriefings from Motormaster and damning photographic evidence collected by his satellites. He had no chance to stop until well after the cycle's breakpoint in the middle of the night shift, when he could at last drag himself out of headquarters and return home. He entered his loft, and felt a surge of guilt when Jazz threw himself into his lap and promptly wolfed down several overdue energon treats; his slave had been trapped here alone and unfed for too long.

"What happened?" Jazz finally wheezed, when he'd finally had his fill and could sit back in relief.

"I waited and waited but you never came back from what was supposed to be a three-breem report, and then nobody else came back either! I didn't know what was going on and there was nobody to ask! What in the pit happened?"

"Message, received from Stunticons," Soundwave explained matter-of-factly, with a calm that felt out of place after his last few hectic joors. "Another attack on Earth, reported."

Jazz's mouth fell open. "No way. Not by -"

"Negative," Soundwave answered before he could ask the question. He didn't know what he would have done with himself or Jazz if the Combaticons had ever thought to try the same thing again.

"This attack, initiated by Insecticons on Decepticon mining facility in Indochina. Infrastructure ruined; all stockpiles stolen."

"You're kidding. The Insecticons? Why would they do that?"

"Unknown." Just saying the word made Soundwave feel twice as tired, since that was the one question they'd all been asking since Motormaster's message came through. Nobody yet had a satisfactory answer. After playing a crucial role in securing Decepticon control over Asia, for their war spoils the Insecticon team had been promised an indefinite supply of energon and dominion over the collection of South Seas islands - so long as they stayed there. Officially Megatron said it was because their curious 'appetite' was better suited to Earth's environment; unofficially it was that nobody wanted them in Iacon because they were just too creepy to be around. They were given no estate on Cybertron, no Autobot slave of their own, but being allowed to remain on Earth and rule their own slice of it was still a generous payment - especially considering their rather checkered history of loyalty to Megatron. The Insecticons should have known better than to test that generosity. They had already used up any chance for a free pass last year, when they so foolishly attacked the Makassar island in Indonesia. Now, Megatron was in no mood to be generous.

"Their actions, unwise," Soundwave added, understating the case by a little. "Megatron sending strike team to Earth to give answer to their actions. Mission will be led by Starscream."

Shockwave had had such a hard time hiding his dismay, too, throughout the briefings that filled the rest of the cycle. Soundwave knew Megatron was biting gunmetal about it too, but there was little other option. The Seeker airforce was their fastest and most effective attack team, and only Starscream could lead it. It was either send the Seekers or lead an attack himself, but Megatron didn't dare turn his back on the restless Cybertron right now. This insurgence of the Insecticons' had just neatly secured Starscream's usefulness and maybe his life, and wryly Soundwave wondered if he would ever guess how close that call had come.

"What's going to happen to the Insecticons?" Jazz was asking, as these thoughts circled in his mind.

"If willing to submit and return to Cybertron for Megatron's questions, perhaps nothing," Soundwave replied, honestly enough. Megatron had been known to show forgiveness before, after suitable groveling - he himself had experienced as much.

“And... if not so willing?”

“Then Megatron given permission for lethal force. Megatron’s patience with insubordination, extinguished.”

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The agenda had been set: the spacebridge would be activated at the top of the third joor that cycle, by which time Soundwave needed to conclude all his pre-mission prep work. This meant conducting any necessary research on their target and the attacked mine’s environment, preparing comm channel frequencies, turning himself over to Hook for a mandated check-up, and assembling any equipment required. He was taking inventory of the few items he’d need to pack when the twins returned from headquarters, vocalizers already tuned to top volume and so determined to out-shout the other that all peace and quiet in his loft was immediately shattered. Ravage, who’d been trying to catch a fast nap on the back of the couch, promptly skimmed across the room and jumped straight out of the window.

Plus one more task: finish deciding which symbiotes would accompany him.

“Rumble’s been playing Warcraft on the command room’s console when he knows no one’s looking -”

“- better than Frenzy skipping his shift completely so he can buy oil rolls -”

“- least I don’t leave the mess on the floor of Starscream’s office like you did that one time - “

“- least *I* didn’t lock him out of his office like you did to the entire squad of enforcers -” Rumble cut himself off with a squawk when Frenzy whacked him hard on the head.

“Shut up, we swore on that one!”

“You were gonna rat on me too, not my fault you were slower!”

“Afthole!”

“Glitched-up code reject!”

The two of them launched at one another in a noisy clatter of armor, each fighting to drag the other to the ground. Jazz, who had emerged from the berth chamber to see what all the racket was about, had to jump adroitly to the side before Rumble and Frenzy rolled right into him.

“What’s with Runt and Rerunt?” he asked idly, hopping up to take Ravage’s place.

“Twins, upset by earlier announcement. Only one will be allowed to join mission on Earth.”

Something they really ought to have already known, his more unsympathetic side couldn’t help but think, but that hadn’t stopped the unending wails of dismay since the moment he said it aloud. Of course he could not take the entire team; surveillance here in Iacon was too important a task to completely abandon. That Ravage would come was unquestioned, his oldest symbiote was his best reconnaissance agent and by far the most capable in combat. Laserbeak too would come, but not her brother; she was faster and anyway she adored Earth. If Buzzsaw adored anything, he wasn’t about to admit it. He didn’t care that he would be left behind, but for the older twins the choice was not so

easy. Both had good qualities suitable for the mission and both loved going to Earth. If he could afford to take them both he would, but that was not possible, and no amount of reminding them '*this mission, not vacation*' had done anything to quiet their begging.

"C'mon, boss, have a spark," wheezed Rumble, currently pinned to the floor by Frenzy but with his own hand locked securely around his brother's throat cables. "It's not like we'd be gone that long. Iacon ain't gonna fall apart in two cycles just cuz we're not there to stare at the monitors! What's the worst that could happen?"

"That answer, preferred not to be known."

"But Buzzbrain can -"

"This argument, already negated. Twins know that minimum of two symbiotes must remain in Iacon, not only to monitor population but to attend to communications console in headquarters and serve officers. Also, to watch Jazz."

"Watch Jazz?" his slave echoed, abruptly sitting up straight just when he'd been settling in to watch the brawl. "What d'ya mean, watch Jazz? You mean *I'm* not going to Earth?"

Wearily Soundwave turned his attention to his other possession, leaving the twins to their own devices. "Jazz, this military mission. Presence of slave inappropriate. Even dangerous; combat, highly likely."

"Exactly! Look at me, Soundwave, I need a change of pace. I need a change of scenery - I can't even go on our walk without worrying that we're going to run into another of the Autobots. I'm stifled. I need a breath of fresh air... literally, I need some nice Earth oxygen. It'll do me so much good."

"Jazz, must remember to speak truth," Soundwave reminded him quietly. "Jazz, actually hoping to see Earth-bound Autobots."

"Well of course that too." Jazz refused to miss a beat on being called out, and merely rolled the optical light of his visor. "Can you blame me? I've hardly seen a one of them since the end of the war. It's been years. I just want to see them and make sure they're okay. That's not so unreasonable, is it?"

"Purpose of mission, not concerned with your goals, reasonable or not. Purpose is to engage Insecticons."

"I won't get in the way! In fact, I'll do you one better. You're about to go camping in the jungle with nothing but a small horde of seekers to keep you company. What's to keep Starscream from shooting you square in the back, if I'm not there to watch it?"

He poked Soundwave emphatically in the chest, and Soundwave pushed his hand aside.

"Soundwave, capable of surviving missions with seekers for many vorns without assistance of Jazz."

Jazz's vocalizer rumbled with frustration. "Soundwave, please. What do you want me to do? I can point out all the many crimes I might commit here in Iacon without you here to mind me, and that it doesn't matter which unlucky twin gets left behind because I *will* convince him to help me burn down one of Shockwave's factories just for grins - you know I can. But I won't say any of that. I don't want to resort to threats."

"Really."

“Yes, really,” Jazz said earnestly, tipping forward on his knees to better face Soundwave. “I feel like we should be past threats by now. Don’t you? I was hoping that we could just go on good old-fashioned friendly persuasion.” He smiled brightly and squeezed Soundwave’s forearm.

“Soundwave, not persuaded.”

Jazz’s smile collapsed and he sat back with a huff to consider his next move. “Okay, then let me ask you a question. Do you not want me there with you, on Earth, by your side?”

Soundwave hesitated rather than say the truth, which was that of course he did. “My wants irrelevant,” he answered instead. “This mission only intended for combat-capable mecha with weapons. Battlefield, unsafe for hobbled slave. Jazz must remain here on Cybertron in safety.”

“Safety?” Jazz repeated scornfully. “Soundwave, look at who I’ll be sharing this city with once you’re gone. Do you really think I’m safe *anywhere* without you?”

Unwanted, memories of Shockwave’s party flashed through his mind, the red glow of Megatron’s optics watching them, watching Jazz. It made his protocols twinge just thinking about it, and with some effort he pushed his thoughts back to the present.

“Jazz, fetch medical kit.”

“But -”

“This discussion, concluded. Fetch kit.”

---

Hook stared at him, the right optic twitching just once. “You want me to - what?”

“Evaluate casseticons’ respective systems,” Soundwave repeated, nudging the eager - if now somewhat battered - Rumble and Frenzy forward. “Whichever twin in better maintenance, permitted to join mission to Earth. Other will remain behind.”

“Uh-huh. Well, in the interest of getting *actual* work done today, I think I’ll leave the pipsqueaks’ contest in Aid’s hands.” He jerked his head toward one of the corridors. “He’s three rooms that way, so go pester him while I work on your boss.”

They took off at a hard sprint, leaving them in peace, and Hook started collecting tools. “If you’ll just lower your firewalls, sir, we’ll get started in a nano.”

Soundwave nodded, and Hook ducked out of the bay to fetch something. Soundwave waited patiently, then waited some more, and was preparing to send an inquisitive ping when Hook burst back through the doors at top volume.

“No, no, googleplex times over NO. How many times do I have to say it before you slagging leave it alone?”

“I wasn’t asking, Constructicon,” Starscream snapped, coming in hot on Hook’s heels. “So are you going to do this the easy way, or do I have to go to your superior about it?”

“You can do whatever you want to Scrapper, but he’ll say no too. And then you can go to his superior, which should be good for a laugh. Good luck getting Shockwave to do any favors for



you.” Pointedly he turned his attention back to his tools, ignoring the way Starscream puffed out his chest armor.

“I have authority from Megatron himself to assemble this strike team, and for a strike team I need a medic. So get your slave in here and tell him to start packing!”

“You want me to hand over my assistant - my *only* assistant who knows which end of the scalpel to hold - to a pack of fuck-hungry seekers for a trip into some Insecticon-infested jungle? Trusting you of all mechs to keep him safe? *No dice*. Aid stays here, end of discussion.”

“But I have authority -”

“To recruit a medic. *I’m* a medic, last time I checked.”

“*You* are a pain in my afterburners. I’d rather have the respectful slave. Well, mostly respectful; he must have said something really stupid to Mega-”

The engine in Hook’s torso revved hard and loud. “I said, I’m your medic. If you don’t like it, take it to Megatron. Otherwise, we’re done here - see you at the space bridge.”

Starscream huffed and pouted, but even he knew when a fight was too small to be worth it. In exasperation he turned away from the medic, and finally noticed Soundwave sitting on a gurney in silence.

“Soundwave! All set for the big trip? I must say I’m a little revved up about it; all the seekers are. It’s been too long since we had ourselves a good fight. It’ll be just like old times.” He lounged against the table next to Soundwave, oblivious to Hook’s glower. “Are you excited?”

“This mission, necessitated by actions of Insecticons. Soundwave, only following orders.”

“Somehow, I knew you’d say that.” Starscream sighed, but he didn’t lose his smile. “Just like old times indeed. Except now I have to make arrangements to make sure Perceptor will be fed while I’m gone, which means either letting one of my grunts have access to my private suite, or leaving him in their quarters and hoping he’s not too damaged by the time I come back. So troublesome. What are you doing with your pet? I’d invite you to leave him with ours, but, oh, that could be awkward, couldn’t it? I’ve heard they don’t like him anymore, for some reason.”

Over by his table, Hook’s fist crumpled and snapped a thin probe in half.

“Starscream, has own concerns. Suggestion, mind them and not others.”

“You’re right, what am I thinking? We all know Megatron will be more than happy to look after Jazz, anyway. Ta tah, I’m off. See you both at the bridge!”

He batted his optics at the two of them and sailed blithely out of the medbay. “I hate him,” Hook growled, and Soundwave could not disagree. He just wished it wasn’t because he was right.

---

The Decepticon space bridge, that precious link connecting Cybertron to its fuel farm colony, was probably the single most vital structure in the entire city. More so than any personal quarters of a single officer, more even than headquarters itself, the bridge mattered. It was, after all, one of the

many factors that led to Decepticon victory in the war, and now it was the key to swift importation of energon from its source to the hungry population who depended on it for survival. With a view to that strategic significance, it was kept squatting in obscurity behind several mechanometer-thick steel walls, and underneath an equally thick protective dome. All of which bristled with security cameras and - when the bridge was not in use - motion activated laser guns. It said much that, even though the bridge bay kept a million gallons of fuel on standby for its activation, the rioters had gone nowhere near the place in their rampant looting. Hungry and desperate did not equal suicidal.

Usually the bay was shrouded in darkness, but when Soundwave arrived the engineers had begun to pump fuel into the capacitors. Lights threaded their way up the dock's pillars, and under his pedes he could feel the slow thump of generators turning over. The ever-punctual Hook was already standing by the dock and ready to depart, Scrapper by his side to see him off. Both of them looked his way, looking ready to nod in greeting, but instead stared blankly at the company he'd brought. Rumble and Ravage trotted by his pedes, Laserbeak was floating along behind him, and by his elbow, Jazz skipped along merrily.

"I'm not even gonna ask why you changed your mind," he informed Soundwave, beaming. "I'm just happy you did."

*"This sucks exhaust," Frenzy griped, through comlink. He'd refused to come and see them off in person. "Not only do I get left behind, but I don't even get to keep Jazz around for entertainment. Gonna be such a blast, with just Buzzbrain here."*

*"Frenzy, expected to fulfill duties without complaint. Also, again, this mission not a vacation."*

*"Tell Rumble that I hope his joints rust in the jungle."* He signed off in a huff, and simultaneously Rumble scowled.

"Are you talking to Frenz? If he's still being a little glitch about losing, tell him I'm not sorry and that I won fair and square. Not my fault that that I'm in better shape-"

The seekers entered the bridge's bay in a burst of noisy chatter and twitching wing panels, forcing Rumble to close his mouth with a sulky snap. All of them were flush with enthusiasm and bright-opticked at the prospect of aerial combat, Starscream more than any of them, but the moment those optics saw Jazz the gleam went promptly flat.

"What," he spat venomously, "is *that* doing here?"

"Soundwave, electing to bring slave. This, problem?"

"Of course it's a problem! This is a Decepticon military mission, not a jaunt through the Autobot whorehouse express! Can you really not stand to be apart from him for even half an orn?"

"Hey," Thundercracker spoke up quickly. "If he gets to bring Jazz, then I get to bring Fireflight."

"Yeah, and we want to bring Groove!" chimed in Ramjet, his trinemates nodding in vigorous assent.

"No, no, NO." In turn Starscream pointed at each of them, Soundwave last. "We are headed into a battlefield, remember? Combatants only - no Autobots!"

"Starscream, earlier willing and attempting to recruit Protectobot First Aid."

"That's different," Starscream said witheringly. "That little brat has medical training; he would have been useful. What's yours going to do, *joke* the Insecticons to death?"

“Cranky, cranky,” Jazz tsked. “*Somebody* got up on the wrong side of Megatron this morning.”

He skittered back behind Soundwave just out of range of Starscream’s swipe, and Starscream’s glower flushed a deeper red before he switched on his smirk.

“So eager to leave the planet, Autobot? Why, lost any friends lately?”

“Completely failed to thwart Shockwave’s political comeback lately?”

Starscream’s engine growled, and Soundwave nudged for Jazz to be quiet, an order he thankfully obeyed though he was fairly certain he saw Jazz stick his glossa out at Starscream in the corner of his vision.

“Send him back home, Soundwave; he is not coming with us.”

“Soundwave, always has jurisdiction to choose members of intelligence team for mission.”

“He’s not on your team, Soundwave, he’s a slave. He’s an object, a thing, and since when do *you* pack so many things?”

“Starscream will discontinue resistance in interest of departing through bridge on schedule.

Generator now fully powered and consuming energy while time wasted. Also, by Starscream’s own admission, seekers eager to depart.” He tilted his head toward Starscream’s restless troops. “Or Starscream, waiting for Megatron’s personal farewell?”

Both Rumble and Jazz stifled snickers, and it rather looked like some of the seekers did too.

Starscream’s optics flashed with the promise of future animosity, but the score had hit home; Starscream had as little interest as Soundwave did in lingering there, waiting for Megatron’s blessing to depart.

“We’re not waiting for anything but my own orders,” Starscream assured him haughtily. “Fine, bring him along if it’s so important to you. But if he accidentally gets caught between my null rays and the enemy... well. Megatron won’t care that much. Keep that in mind.”

Soundwave nodded calmly, even as he had to tamp down his ruffled carrier protocols, and Starscream turned back to face the assembled Decepticons. “Alright, seekers! And... others. Onward through the space bridge. It’s time to pay Earth a visit.”

Skywarp and the others put up a lusty cheer, and fell in behind Starscream marching up onto the dock. The heat of the activated bridge was so intense. Soundwave’s hand clutched Jazz’s wrist, ensuring they would not be separated, and then they too stepped forward. In an instant, Cybertron was gone.

Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on earth

*Blue* was the first thing Soundwave recognized, once landed on the Earth's floor, an endless and intense blue that burned itself into his optic sensors even when he switched them off. Every sensor on his body was under immediate assault by the planet, where every sensation amplified itself to a more extreme degree than on the cold and lifeless Cybertron. Here there was more heat, more light, even the scorched smell of sand and rock under Earth's sun was enough to overwhelm his nasal sensors. He scrambled to adjust, all the while knowing it must be a thousand times worse for his sensitive casseticons. Through the link he felt their dizzying disorientation as they struggled to cope with the flood of new data. At the same time, he felt the ache in his spark at being so abruptly separated from two of his symbiotic team. The sparks of Frenzy and Buzzsaw were now as distant as stars on the far side of the galaxy. He'd known it was coming, planned for it, but that didn't make his carrier protocols any easier to bear.

Somehow Soundwave pried his attention away and back to his external sensors, cautiously re-engaging them one at a time. Upon opening his optics, he discovered Jazz had wrapped himself tight around Soundwave's left arm, face buried in the crook of his armor, and showed no signs of moving. Was he too overwhelmed by the torrent of sensations in Earth's environment? Soundwave cupped a hand under his jawline, and Jazz flinched and clung to Soundwave even harder.

"No, wait," he pleaded, somewhat muffled. "I just- I wanted to come so badly, didn't I? But now I'm remembering what it was like - the last time I was here."

The last day Jazz had stood on Earth ground was a day no Decepticon would ever forget.

Soundwave thought about how the human government's weaponry had turned on Autobot City, remembered their frantic and demoralized evacuation from the planet. On their side, the parties had lasted for weeks. For Jazz, the memories must be devastating.

Soundwave said nothing, but exerted enough pressure to force Jazz's chin up, tilting his head back so he too could see the sky. The light behind Jazz's visor dimmed itself nearly right out, as his optical sensors reacted to the blazing sunlight, but he didn't shutter them completely. Nor did he try to break free from Soundwave's grasp.

"Still blue," Jazz whispered, gaze fixed upward. "I forgot how blue their sky is. Gorgeous, ain't it?"

Soundwave found it unnecessary to answer. Even as Jazz arched further backward to take in more of the view, his grip on Soundwave didn't relax and Soundwave could still sense the occasional tremor in his body. This is what he'd been hiding under those blasé smiles, for all this time.

Soundwave still wondered if he'd done the right thing, bringing Jazz to Earth, but right now in this moment, watching him gawk at the brilliant blue canopy above, Soundwave had no regrets.

All around them, the rest of the team were also shaking off their own dizziness, stumbling or swaying while their sensors tried to calibrate. Leaning indolently over the low wall that bounded the bridge, Drag Strip was watching it all with a considerably smug look of amusement.

"Bout time," he drawled, when he caught Starscream's optic. "I've been waiting for, like, twenty minutes."

"How extraordinarily unfortunate," Starscream commiserated, dusting a speck of sand from his

armor. “That’s three breems of whatever pointless time-wasting nonsense you had planned that I suppose you’ll never get back. It’s just one hardship after another for you Stunticons, isn’t it?”

“Twenty minutes,” Drag Strip repeated, with an accompanying roll of the optics. “You’re on Earth now, Starscream, remember to get it right. Minutes. Now c’mon, my ride’s waiting and I’ve got to get back to my pointless nonsense and shit.”

He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder, and Soundwave’s gaze followed the gesture to find none other than the Autobot shuttle himself, gleaming white against the desert sand.

“Skyfire!” On his left side, Jazz lit up and skipped away from Soundwave without waiting for permission. On his right, Soundwave watched Starscream go stock still, his jaw slowly falling open with astonishment.

“J-Jazz?” Skyfire stuttered, the panels on his wings twitching briefly with surprise. “This is unexpected; I had not realized any Autobots would be coming. It is a pleasure.”

“Likewise,” Jazz assured him, throwing an enthusiastic hug around the only part of Skyfire that really could be hugged in this form, his landing struts. Back over by Soundwave, Starscream’s mouth had swung as far open as it could, and now he finally managed to summon words out of it.

“Is that- is his transformation cog *locked* that way?”

“What, didn’t you know? We use him to get to the bridge and back.” Drag Strip stared at Starscream blankly, then misunderstood the look on Starscream’s face. “Don’t worry, it’s okay - they jacked with his thrusters or whatever so he can’t break atmo. It’s not like he can escape.”

“You - are - using,” Starscream snarled through gritted denta, “one of Cybertron’s greatest scientists in all history... as a *taxicab*?”

“Uh, he’s a slave.”

“He is NOT -” Starscream bit the word off his glossa when he realized everyone was staring at him, and quickly reassumed his composure. “... ‘just’ a slave, young Stunticon. He’s an *asset*, one that should be utilized in the most intelligent way possible. I will have words with Megatron about this when we return.”

“Bet you will,” Skywarp muttered under his ventilations, restlessly pacing away from the bridge. “C’mon, Screem, we got half a planet between us and the base and we’re wasting the good tailwind! Let’s *go*, already.”

“In a hurry, Starscream?” drawled Jazz. “Aren’t you at least going to come over here, greet your old partner? You must miss him.” Purposefully he draped himself even more intimately over Skyfire’s struts, beaming as if he couldn’t see the way Starscream’s hands curled into fists.

“Burn and die, Autobot.”

“Starscream says hi,” Jazz relayed cheerfully to Skyfire. What Skyfire thought about any of it, Soundwave didn’t know, and if he wanted to say anything to Starscream he wasn’t given a chance.

With a snarl Starscream transformed into jet mode, a cue that the other seekers promptly took in a flurry of shifting frame parts. All around them, jet engines roared to life.

“Take flight, troops. We’ll see you groundpounders when you get there.”

With a chorus of whoops and cheers they all shot away from the bridge, lifting off one after the

other, spinning joyfully into the wind. Those left behind boarded the shuttle, Jazz falling in beside Soundwave when beckoned.

“Mission, less than day old,” he commented. “Antagonism towards Starscream, already begun?”

Jazz grinned and shrugged. “Like you should talk. Did you know Skyfire was locked in alt-mode?”

Soundwave exchanged a brief glance with Hook, the medic responsible for it. “Affirmative.”

Drag Strip rapped his fist against Skyfire’s interior. “We’re all in, slave, light it up. And don’t dawdle, I wanna beat those aftholes back to the base.”

“Yes sir.”

The powerful engines underneath them thrummed, and Jazz made himself comfortable swinging his legs over Soundwave’s lap. Hook stared and then looked away; Drag Strip just stared.

“Can we go to Paris while we’re on Earth?” Jazz murmured dreamily. “I love Paris.”

---

Not at all to Soundwave’s surprise, his casseticons vanished the moment they arrived at the Decepticon fuel camp. In a new environment, surrounded by new mecha, their most fundamental base coding would have been braying at them to explore, eavesdrop, and record whatever they could. He did not attempt to hold them back as the three split in as many directions, without so much as a word or a chirp in farewell. At least he didn’t have to hold back Jazz, who stayed obediently by his side, but Soundwave did not miss how that blue visor glowed with eager interest. Though his head wasn’t turning much, Soundwave knew he wasn’t missing a single detail of the corridors and corners they passed.

Drag Strip led him and Starscream to Motormaster’s door and then stomped away without pause, still sulking about Skyfire’s loss in the transatlantic race against the Seekers. The door slid open, and they were all promptly faced with a wall of more blue and blazing sunshine. No city skyline here; Motormaster’s lavish office had a floor-to-ceiling view of the the labor field below, affording him the perfect air-conditioned vantage spot to oversee the empire’s slaves at their work. Neither was the glass tinted at all, so Soundwave suspected they could see him just as well. He stood watching them now, back deliberately turned to the door, and only turned at the sound of their footsteps crossing into his space.

“Commander Starscream, Director Soundwave,” he greeted flatly, both looking and sounding anything but pleased to do so. “Welcome to Decepticon Earth Headquarters. We are all humbled by the presence of such renowned Decepticon warriors. The human government also sends its regards, and hopes you will allow them the honor of sending their ambassador here to receive you.”

“Never mind that,” Starscream said airily, waving a negligent hand in Motormaster’s general direction. “We’re not here to sightsee; we’re here to put the fear of Primus into the Insecticons. Since Megatron’s current troops here on Earth don’t seem to be doing that.”

The engine in Motormaster’s chest rumbled ominously, which, given the sheer size of the mech, was enough to make Soundwave’s vibration sensors tingle unpleasantly. “Ain’t easy keepin’ watch on a

planet this big. ‘Specially when four of us have to stay on base at all times.’”

“Well, that’s the way it is for those who can’t fly,” Starscream said brightly, smirking when that engine growled again. “Now then, I’d like to be briefed on all Insecticon activity since your last call. I assume you’ve been keeping them under surveillance?”

“We have. Snapshots are in the conference room, down this way.” He jerked his head to the left and started forward to lead them, and for the first time his gaze fell on Jazz. Right away Soundwave saw the fresh gleam of curiosity and interest in his purple optics, though he said nothing. Neither did Soundwave, but he moved to block Jazz from his line of sight anyway.

The Stunticon leader ushered them down a wide corridor - every corridor was wide enough to allow transformation and driving, and going by the plentiful tire tracks on the floor (and walls) that was exactly what they spent all day doing - and into a spacious conference room. Dozens of satellite snapshots were already switched on to display across the center table.

“Vicious as ever,” Starscream murmured, bending over a shot of one twisted, mutilated human’s vehicle. “They certainly didn’t hold back, did they? I assume the U.N. is demanding answers.”

Motormaster snorted. “The human government kills more of their own every week. They don’t care why it happened, all they want is a guarantee that those buzzers won’t be swarming up their streets tomorrow morning for more of the same. I told ‘em to relax and get back to countin’ their money, but truth is I got no idea what they’re up to.”

“Yes, back to that question of motive,” Starscream mused. “You reported they ripped open a cache of fuel.”

“They did, but it weren’t more than a 500 gallon canister.”

“Well that won’t last them more than a month. And they’ve got their own wells offshore... why risk Megatron’s wrath for such a minor theft?”

“I figured you’d know that, you being such an expert at it and all.” This time it was Motormaster’s turn to smirk. “That’s what you sneaky types do, right? Ignore the warning and then just do it all over again?”

Starscream’s optics had begun to glitter maliciously, but at that last part he frowned and canted his head to the side. “This... is not the first attack.”

“Yeah, I know. I just said so.”

Motormaster looked disappointed, but Starscream didn’t see it, busy scowling at one of the snapshots again. “Give me the details of what was lost in the first attack last year, the one further south.”

“They didn’t even take any fuel, they just tore up a town-”

“The details, Stunticon.”

Motormaster glowered, but accessed the table’s console anyway, sweeping the digital files across the table for Starscream to read. Immediately Starscream started flicking through them, wearing a look that made Soundwave uneasy, though he knew well better than to interrupt. Meanwhile, the door whooshed open and in shuffled the former leader of the Aerialbot team, Silverbolt. Heavy chains scraped across the floor, tethering his ankle joints so close together he could take no more than small steps, and chains just as thick manacled his wrists together too. The relatively smaller slaves back on Cybertron wore such thin and light restraints by comparison, a pointed reminder of both their size

and their position surrounded by Decepticons on a Decepticon-controlled planet, but these chains were built for business. Soundwave saw the dents in his armor and the streaked black scars on his neck around the collar, and wondered how hard this one had fought back. Sharp-toothed clamps had been left pinched along the edges of both his wings, not to prevent flight because he could not transform anyway, but just to cause pain.

Whether he'd known they were coming or not, Silverbolt looked right at the visitors without so much as a twitch of a reaction, then turned toward Motormaster. Mildly surprised that he hadn't even acknowledged Jazz, Soundwave checked his peripheral vision to see what Jazz's reaction to Silverbolt would be. Only to find, to his own blank surprise, that Jazz had vanished. He'd dropped into a graceful kneeling position just behind his chair when Soundwave first sat down, and now he was gone.

Nobody else seemed to have noticed. Silverbolt was setting a tray of three brimming cubes on the table by Motormaster's elbow, then spoke in a voice as hard and dead as the look in his optics. "Will there be anything more at this time, master?"

Starscream glanced up from the files at that, suddenly looking very amused, but said nothing. Motormaster grunted in the negative, and the Autobot bowed and clinked his way out of the room.

"Master?" Starscream echoed, the second the door had slid shut. "My, how formal. Maybe the Aerialbot didn't get the memo that you never actually managed to catch Sideswipe, and so Megatron never *actually* gave you a slave of your own."

Motormaster just shrugged. "Maybe he ain't mine legally - yet - but it's still good he knows his place. That bot and I have history. He needed some good breaking in."

After several seconds of near-panic, Soundwave finally realized that Jazz was underneath the table now, hiding behind Soundwave's own legs. Not from Motormaster, but from the doorway. As if he were afraid of Silverbolt?

"Anyway, didja find what you were lookin' to find?"

"Yes, I know what they've been up to for the past year. A pity Megatron didn't think to send me here then - a lot of ugliness could have been avoided."

"Why? What are they doin'?"

"Breeding," Starscream answered simply, shutting the file down with a sweep of his hand. "The bastards are building their drones again."

---

"How did this happen?" asked Dirge. "They weren't supposed to have access to the kind of metals they'd need."

"They weren't 'supposed' to cross their territory's boundaries, either," Starscream answered dryly. "They also weren't 'supposed' to attack Megatron's lands or just in general, 'supposed' to be treacherous little bottom feeding traitors anymore. They must have forgotten this, for all Megatron insisted they were *supposed* to be loyal now."



“But why?” Ramjet spoke up. “They can build all their knockoff drones they want, but they know they’d never stand up to a real fight against the rest of the Decepticon army. They can’t win - so what’s the point?”

He and the rest of the two trines were lolling idly on the curious-yet-comfortably-soft furniture made by humans, while Starscream briefed them in what must pass as the Stunticons’ common room. It was certainly large enough, space being one of the many things so plentifully found here on Earth, though for now it was empty of anyone but Soundwave and the seekers. And Jazz, kneeling over there by the entirely windowed wall and for all appearances paying no attention to the conversation behind him. He was absorbed in watching the Earth-bound Autobot slaves below, working in the scorching heat.

“Maybe they think they won’t have to face the rest of the Decepticon army,” Starscream was saying, “if they keep hiding in the jungle. The satellite’s cameras saw them going in, but it’s been more than three solar rotations and they still haven’t come back out. I expect they will try to employ guerrilla tactics against any force sent in to engage them.”

“Like, us,” Thundercracker pointed out.

“I hope you’re not afraid, T.C.,” Starscream said sweetly, and got a withering glare in return.

“Good, because we’re still carrying forward with the mission as planned. Nothing’s changed, after all.”

“Except that we don’t outnumber them anymore.”

“We outclass them. Those mindless drones are not a threat, and we will deal with both them, and their masters, on our own. I have no intention of returning to Cybertron until they are permanently neutralized.”

“You mean, you have no intention of returning to *Megatron* until you have a victory in your subspace pocket.”

“Never you mind what my reasons are,” Starscream said sharply. “The Insecticons have attacked our colony and we will defend it, because that is our *job*.”

“If that’s our job then why aren’t we doing it, instead of sitting around and talking about it?”

“To leave now is pointless and tactically unwise. It’s already night on that part of the planet, and the Insecticons have had three days to learn the local territory. We’re better off leaving early tomorrow morning; we can find and confront them in the daylight better and *why* are you making that face?”

Unable to tolerate Thundercracker’s sour expression any longer, Starscream huffed out all his vents in exasperation. “Are you in some special hurry? I hope you’re not going to waste my time pouting about your little red jet. There’s plenty of other Autobots here if you’re lonely - even three other Aerialbots if that’s what you need.”

“*Don’t* talk to me about Aerialbots,” Thundercracker snarled, and stormed out of the room before Starscream had a chance to say another word. Starscream blinked, looking slightly taken aback, then exchanged glances with Skywarp who promptly took off after his trinemate.

“We’re gonna go take another spin over the gulf,” Dirge announced, “since we got the free time and all.”

Noisily they all clattered out of the room, followed by a still slightly petulant Starscream. Not until Soundwave was sure that they were completely alone did he approach Jazz. His slave looked up

when he drew close, smiling wanly.

“I see a lot of new faces out there. Megatron’s been busy, recruiting for us. So kind of him.”

“Soundwave, displeased by Jazz’s behavior during briefing. Moving to underneath table, not appropriate.”

“Well I didn’t have a lot of options. The door opened, I panicked - it was the only place I had to go.”

“Location, not problem,” Soundwave elaborated irritably. “Jazz should not be hiding at all. This building not home for Soundwave, or Jazz, but territory of Stunticons. Unsuitable for your typical hiding games.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t do it to scare you, I just needed to get out of Bolt’s sight.”

“This reasoning, inconsistent. Jazz pleaded inclusion on mission for purpose of seeing Earth-bound Autobots.”

“Yes, to see *them*.” Jazz pushed himself into a standing position. “Not to let them see *me*, looking like - well, like I’m cleaned, fed, and not tortured on a daily basis. Gaw, Motormaster is a piece of work, ain’t he? For such a young thing, he sure picked up the finer points of cruelty fast enough. Nothing less from Megatron’s favorite love child.” He slumped against the glass with a despondent sigh, looking over the sorry sight of his fellow Autobots. Most of them were nearly indistinguishable by color, under layers of grit and sand, and they moved stiffly in the hot sunshine, evidence of that same grit accumulating in the joints. Only the occasional gash or fresh dent marked any difference in their appearance.

“I can’t let any of them see me,” Jazz mumbled. “Specially not knowin’ just how much gossip Brawn was packing when he got sent back from Cybertron; Primus knows what they think of me even now.”

“Jazz, eager enough to greet Skyfire.”

“Well, there was a Starscream to be pissed off, you see.” Jazz managed to flash him a sassy grin, though it faded quickly enough. “Anyway, Skyfire’s different. He gets it. He knows what it’s like to have feelings for a Decepticon that... are not complete hatred. Somehow, even after all this time. Amazing, isn’t it?”

Every Decepticon knew Starscream was passionately possessive about the Autobot, but after all these years of war and then slavery, Soundwave had assumed the feeling must be quite thoroughly one-sided. “Skyfire, said nothing to Starscream.”

“And that’s how you know.”

There was a strange wistfulness in Jazz’s smile, but before Soundwave could question him further, the roar of engines obliterated the quiet and three Stunticons burst into the room near-simultaneously. Drag Strip spun two donuts and then flashily transformed mid-roll, crowing “I win!”

“I wasn’t racing you,” pointed out Dead End, transforming in a far more sedate and traditional manner. “I wasn’t, actually, even coming this way, but thanks to Wildrider here blocking me from behind, I didn’t have much choice in the matter.”

“Frat party, in the house,” Jazz muttered. “We should get out of here.”

Soundwave agreed completely, but hardly had they turned for the door when Wildrider was already in front of them, optics gleaming. “Check it out - old school generation. What’s the word, grandpa? How’s Cybertron? Still boring?” He rapped his palms in a line across Soundwave’s chest and went on his cheerful way, headed for the energon dispenser. At the door, Breakdown made a belated entrance behind his teammates, saw Soundwave, fixed him with a single horrified stare and then promptly transformed again and shot backward out of sight. Jazz saw the entire sequence and looked a little confused; he was just opening his mouth to ask Soundwave about it when Drag Strip closed in on him.

“And look, he’s even got his toy. So I heard you’re, like, funny and stuff. Go on, Autobot; tell us a joke.”

“I’d say there are enough jokes in the room already,” Jazz murmured, looking like he was trying hard to hide his smile. Drag Strip and Wildrider both looked blank, but Soundwave heard Dead End smother a quiet snort. As both direction to Jazz and warning to the others, Soundwave dropped a large hand on Jazz’s shoulder and steered him to the door.

“Aww, don’t go!” Wildrider complained. “We never get company out here in the sticks. You’re not taking off til tomorrow, so what’s your rush?”

“Sorry boys,” Jazz chirped, “we have important ‘old mech’ stuff to do like... be *not crazy*, off somewhere else. Please excuse us.”

“Oh my, he *is* droll,” Dead End praised, reclining into his seat with a cube. “What razor-sharp wit. It’s an absolute shame that you’re shipping out to the jungle tomorrow, where you’ll no doubt be consumed alive by voracious cannibalistic Insecticon drones. Such a waste of a good - if outdated - Porsche build.”

“If you’re worried, you’re welcome to come along and back us up. Maybe if any of you Stunticons can actually land a shot on one of Megatron’s enemies, he’d be more impressed with you.”

Dead End didn’t so much as twitch. “And interfere with my scheduled wash-and-polish session with Tracks? I think not. Megatron can just go right on being unimpressed, thank you.”

Surprised to have missed his target, Jazz hesitated, of which Soundwave took advantage. “Jazz,” he prompted, tilting his head toward the exit. Again Jazz moved toward the doorway, only to find it completely filled with Motormaster’s massive frame and therefore quite impassable. He didn’t exactly rush at Jazz, but one single step carried him so far forward that Jazz had to back up quite hastily to keep clear. Those purple optics glowed with greedy interest, devouring every inch of Jazz’s body, but when he spoke it was to Soundwave.

“My team bothering you, sir? They know these floors are open to guests, so if they’re chasin’ you out, I’ll deal with it.”

“Negative; interference unnecessary,” Soundwave replied, keeping his sigh on the inside. All the Stunticons were notoriously indifferent to the concept of rank, one of the many reasons they were universally loathed by older Decepticons - all except for Motormaster, who did take note of it but only so he could rub in just the right insult. He wanted to imply Soundwave was intimidated by the surrounding Stunticons, when ‘irritated’ would be closer to the truth.

“You must be feeling revved up,” Motormaster was saying as he filled a cube, oblivious to Soundwave’s frosty glare, “getting ready to slug it out with those rogue Cons in the wild. Gotta say, I’m jealous. Wish Megatron would give me the permission to join you all; been too long since I killed anything.”

“You killed my favorite lubricant supplier last week,” Drag Strip pointed out waspishly.

“It should’na been where I could step on it. Humans don’t count anyway - killed somethin’ that matters.” Again his gaze fell all-too-obviously on Jazz, who fidgeted.

*“Le péquenaud est encore en train de me fixer,” he muttered. “The redneck is staring at me again. It’s creeping me out. Let’s go, already.”*

Motormaster raised a optic ridge and crossed his arms. *“Pas besoin d’avoir la trouille, Autobot,”* he drawled. *“Ain’t no need to be afraid, Autobot. This redneck knows better than to touch what’s not his.”*

Soundwave thought Jazz might have actually choked; his visor flushed deeper blue in a lightning-fast show of embarrassment before he fixed an icy smile on his face. *“Touché,”* he acknowledged, but now his grip on Soundwave’s wrist was actively tugging him to the exit.

“You ain’t actually gonna take that short stack into battle with you, sir? He can stay here with us.”

Soundwave ignored the remark and the snickering that followed it, turned his back on Motormaster, and in spite of Jazz’s best efforts, left the room at a deliberately unhurried pace. Of course Jazz was eager to escape; he was around Decepticons he didn’t know how to tease and therefore didn’t know what to do with himself. Earth was indeed turning out to be full of surprises.

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*“Hey! Autobot!”*

*Silverbolt had just drawn level with the doorway when Thundercracker’s unmistakeably deep voice echoed in the halls, and he came to an immediate stop. From this angle, Rumble could see the flash of recognition in his optics before they turned hard and opaque again. By the time he turned to face to the approaching seeker, his face was set still as stone.*

*“Yes sir. How may I serve you?”*

*“I, uh, just wanted to tell you that Fireflight, he’s okay. Talks about you a lot, misses his team and all, but he’s alright.”*

*“I see. Is that all?”*

*“Yeah,” Thundercracker answered, after a second’s worth of blank hesitation. “That’s all.”*

*Silverbolt made to turn away again and Thundercracker’s visible confusion turned to exasperation.*

*“I mean, no! That’s not all - don’t you have anything to say back? I can give him a message for you, if you want.”*

*“No sir, I do not.”*

*“What do you mean, no? How can you not have anything to say to him?”*

*“What would you have me say, sir?”*

*“I don’t know - he’s your wingmate. I figured you’d want to tell him something.”*

*Silverbolt didn’t so much as shift an optic. “Such as what? That I miss him? That I hope he is well? He already knows these things. There is no need to trouble yourself. Sir.”*

*“Watch the attitude, Aerialbot,” Thundercracker warned. “You should know, I go to a lot of trouble already to look after Red- I mean, Fireflight. I don’t beat him, and I don’t let him go hungry. I also keep his wings properly cleaned, which is more than anyone’s bothered to do, ever.”*

*“And you don’t force him to share your berth, and he can go flying with you.” Silverbolt advanced one step on Thundercracker, expression and voice still perfectly even. “And if you haven’t let him go free by now, it’s because he just hasn’t bothered to ask for it. Yes?”*

*“What?”*

*“That’s what I thought. Thank you for your concern, sir, but as I said, I have no message for him. Am I dismissed?”*

*“Just go away already,” Thundercracker snapped. “Sorry I said anything.”*

*His vents huffed and he spun on his heels to march away, but he almost certainly heard what Silverbolt said next, as the Autobot barely bothered to lower to voice. “Decepticons are never sorry.”*

*Then he too continued on his way.*

“Silverbolt’s a total stain, right?” Rumble complained, done with his quick upload and already back out of Soundwave’s chest. “Everyone on Cybertron knows how much T.C. fusses over that newsparked bot; he’s almost worse than you. Fireflight oughtta be grateful for that kind of treatment, right? And his leader should be happy for him.”

He kicked his legs back and forth, watching Soundwave expectantly, and when Soundwave said nothing he prompted, “Right?”

According to the timestamp, this interaction had occurred after Silverbolt bringing drinks to the three of them, and just before Starscream’s briefing in the common room. It at least explained Thundercracker’s hostile reaction when Starscream mentioned Aerialbots, though the conversation itself left Soundwave feeling strangely uneasy and not at all sure why.

“Boss?”

“Autobot’s demeanor, unexpected,” he finally said. “Atypical in comparison to recorded history of gestalt loyalty.”

“Well I saw the wing clamps. Maybe Motormaster finally snapped the kid and now he’s just bitter and jealous that Fireflight’s so much better off than he is.”

“Perhaps,” Soundwave acknowledged, but somehow he knew that wasn’t right. Never mind, though; it wasn’t important, just one more piece of idle eavesdropping picked up along with the rest of it in Rumble’s snooping through the base.

“Can I go back to the TV room now, these guys got loads of stuff that hasn’t been sent to Cybertron yet. I wanna bring back everything I can for Frenz.”

“Rumble, dismissed. Attempt to remember priority of surveillance duties while searching for entertainment.”

“Yes, boss!”

Rumble scampered out of their room, a guest suite on the residential level of the compound that commanded an impressive view of the Arabian desert. It also, Soundwave now noticed, was quite empty, meaning Jazz had disappeared on him again. Not that he'd ordered him to stay, exactly, while docking Rumble, but after their earlier conversation he didn't think he'd have to. If Jazz had gone off in search of Seekers or Stunticons to antagonize, Soundwave would be very displeased.

That hadn't happened, however. Jazz was right outside in the corridor, leaning casually against the wall, absorbed in watching something. Soundwave couldn't see around the curve of the corridor until he was near enough, which afforded him a view to the washracks at the end of the hall. Inside, Breakdown was being serviced with soap and sponge by the Autobots' former security director. Red Alert had always been something of a personal nemesis to Soundwave's small spies, so he recognized him right away in spite of his dulled paint - and the heavy magnetic blinder clamped over his optics.

Slowly Breakdown turned, and the blindfolded slave scrubbed at his armor, then fumbled for the sprayer to rinse. By the looks of it he accidentally splashed him right in the vents, and Breakdown slapped him hard across the face. Then he changed his mind and spun Red Alert around, and began biting and licking at his neck cables. Jazz watched this without flinching, and when he spoke his voice was almost eerily neutral.

“I'm feeling cramped. You feeling cramped? Let's get out of here; we got time to kill, and I haven't been away from this planet so long that I've forgotten that the best time for taking a drive - or walk, in our case - is the sunset. We should take advantage.”

He turned his back on the scene with a smile for Soundwave, albeit a smile that did not reach his optics. Soundwave didn't like the lack of reaction, but he was probably right that escaping the compound for a little while was a good idea. Silently he nodded in acquiescence, and led Jazz downstairs and out of the compound. The end of the day's rotation had indeed come; in the east the sky was softening to a deeper blue, while vivid streaks of gold and scarlet were coloring the west.

The drop in temperature was just as dramatic, already ten degrees cooler than what Soundwave had experienced upon their arrival and still falling. Now the breeze against their plating was pleasantly warm, rather than scorching hot, and carrying on it the sounds and smells of the thriving ecosystem around them. Off to their left Laserbeak glided past, taking full advantage of Earth's atmospheric winds, and Jazz waved.

“Isn't this planet beautiful?” he sighed. “It's so warm, compared to home, so... alive. Why does it seem like you can see so much more farther here, when it's Cybertron that's got the thinner air? I feel like I can see forever. Just look at that road.” They paused on the crest of a small hill, where Soundwave could see a thin black highway stretching from the compound entrance straight into the west, disappearing into the overly intense glow of the sunset. “It's like it's just asking me to drive into all that color.”

A distant noise distracted him and he looked back to the base. Wildrider and Drag Strip had fled the confines of the wall and were chasing one another in circles, their wheels throwing up sprays of sand with every turn. From here, they could just barely hear their whoops of delight. In spite of himself, Jazz had to smile.

“They look like they're having fun, don't they? This planet always did have the best driving.” Unhappily he tugged at the collar around his neck. “Living on Cybertron all this time, on those

wretched streets, it's easy to forget what was taken away. But here, with so much flat earth in every direction, and a highway just begging me to find out what's on the other side of that horizon, I remember. I remember... driving."

He'd dropped his hand at first but now it was back again, still toying with the collar that prevented his transformation. One step, then another, took him a little further away from Soundwave and a little closer to the dune's edge. "When I'd had a hard night or I just needed to be alone for a while, I'd hit the road and go wherever I wanted, just me and the radio, driving forever. It's been too long; I need to feel the earth under my wheels again. If I could just -"

He stopped toying with the collar and started pulling on it in earnest, fingers scrabbling to get a good hold. "Jazz," Soundwave warned, but Jazz didn't seem to hear.

"- get out of this thing, I need it off, need to drive - get it off *get it off!*" His engine roared with frustration, vents desperately cycling air, hands clawing at his neck. Soundwave had to grab both his arms and pull them away before he hurt himself, or triggered the collar's punishment. Even with Soundwave's iron grip pinning each arm Jazz refused to calm down, thrashing in panic.

"Jazz, stop!"

"Take it off, please," he begged. "I need to get on that road, Soundwave, I *need* it. Just one drive, that's all I want. And then I would come back! I would, I swear it. Let me go, please, and I will come back to you."

The words stabbed Soundwave right in the spark, and with effort he suppressed the pain. "Jazz," he said quietly, but quite firmly, "lying."

That was what finally got through to Jazz. He stiffened in Soundwave's grasp, then abruptly sagged, all his mindless panic snuffed out like a single extinguished flame.

"Oh... you're right. I-I wouldn't, not really. I didn't mean that at all."

His legs crumpled beneath him and Soundwave let him sink to the sand, cautiously relaxing his grip but keeping watchful. Jazz's fans spun still, trying to expel the heat his body had so unexpectedly roused. "You still like it when I'm honest with you?"

"Always, no. But lying, more painful. Soundwave, knows Jazz too well."

A bleak smile crossed Jazz's face at that comment. "And whose fault is that?"

"Soundwave's," he admitted readily enough. "Fault, completely mine."

The last of the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, taking all its brilliant gold light with it. The temperature plunged to a refreshing new low, but that wasn't the reason Jazz was trembling.

"Maybe someday it will be the truth," he whispered. "Maybe someday I would come back. Or maybe you'll never trust me enough to unlatch this thing. I don't which one is scarier."

"Soundwave, in no position to remove collar. Jazz knows this."

"But if you were... would you?"

Only if he was sure to come back, a sureness that Soundwave knew he might never feel except by the security of that collar, which meant it would never come off, which meant he might never know if Jazz was truly his. The circular logic made his spark hurt again, and so he pushed it aside. "Jazz,

should not waste time asking hypothetical questions; nothing about current circumstances will change for it.”

Gently he cupped the edge of Jazz’s face, then guided him to lie against his own frame and rest.

Now that the sunlight had gone, the sky had begun to freckle with stars, fascinatingly foreign compared to the stars seen on Cybertron, and thousands more to be seen out here in the desert with no light pollution. Soundwave was in no hurry. They stayed out on the sands long past the point where Jazz no longer shook, his ventilations drawing deep and clear, even talking a little and laughing again. Jazz would probably not forget what happened here, and Soundwave certainly wouldn’t. But they could, at least, pretend to.

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The door whooshed aside and the automatic lights flicked on, illuminating his guest suite. It held no symbiotes yet, which Soundwave had expected, but neither was it empty, which he had not.

Starscream was lounging comfortably in the seat directly facing the door, drinking a cube of something sparkly, and looked far too pleased with himself when a very alarmed Jazz yelped and jumped straight backward into Soundwave’s chest.

“Are we in the wrong room?” Jazz asked tersely. “Or are you? Please say it’s us.”

“For the moment, I’d say we’re all where we need to be,” Starscream drawled, gently swishing the fuel in his cube. “If I had to spend one more nanoklick around those insufferable little Stunticons, I might have murdered one of them. And anyway, I’m overdue for some quality time with my dear friend Soundwave. I’ve hardly seen you since that night at Shockwave’s.”

He threw a significant look at Soundwave, who heard Jazz’s systems hitch just ever so slightly.

Outwardly, he let nothing show but a roll of the optics and a lazy, condescending smile. “Ah, of course. You’re here to scrounge up some favor from Soundwave that you *think* you’re due, because of something you *think* you heard, from an Autobot that Megatron doesn’t *think* about or care about in any way.”

“Wrong on all counts,” Starscream said cheerfully, “especially that last one. Isn’t that right, Soundwave?”

Soundwave said nothing, but seated himself facing Starscream, straight-backed and impassive as ever. Though he didn’t take his optics off Starscream for a second, he sensed Jazz slink into place at his pedes.

“You really were careless that night, weren’t you, Jazz? Got your face in Megatron’s lap, got caught lying to your friends, and just to wrap it all up, let slip a secret that Soundwave has no doubt been desperately guarding from Megatron since the end of the war. And to think that I’d get an even better present than watching you get taken down a peg by your fellow slaves. I really am grateful for the tip. The only difficult part has been deciding just how to spend it.” Lovingly he drew out a longish pause, as if considering his options. “Soooo.... threesome?”

Jazz’s engine promptly revved hard and loud. “If you think Soundwave would *ever* let-”

He was cut short when Starscream burst into hysterical giggles. “Oh, I’m just kidding!” he gasped between ventilations. “You should have seen the look on your- oh, that was priceless. As if I’d ever share a berth with a boring guy like Soundwave. Your reaction was very cute, though. Has the



ever-so-promiscuous Jazz actually discovered monogamy?”

Caught out, Jazz simply huffed and glared. Starscream responded with a beatific smile, then threw back the last of his cube and wiggled it in Jazz’s direction.

“My cube is empty, slave.”

“What a tragic turn of events.”

“Go get me another.”

“I don’t fetch your drinks anymore, remember? I work for Soundwave now, and I will only leave this room when Soundwave says so.”

“Jazz,” Soundwave spoke up, for the first time since they’d entered the room. “Refill cube for Starscream.”

Betrayed, Jazz twisted around with an indignant gasp. “What? But -”

“Argument unnecessary. Dismissed.”

*“Não me faça ir,”* Jazz pleaded, both hands on his knees now. *“Don’t make me go. I do not want to leave you alone with him.”*

“Your wants, noted but irrelevant. Dismissed.”

The second command sealed it; no matter how reluctantly, Jazz would at least obey. In a sulk he rolled to his pedes and left the room, though not without many an anxious glance backward.

“Finally,” Starscream exhaled, when the door had swished shut behind him. “Now to business, just between us Cons.”

“Starscream, advised caution. Recent memory should serve adequate warning to those who present threat against me.”

“Soundwave, Soundwave, relax! You and your pet have got it all wrong; I’m not here to hurt you. I’m here to *help* you. Because you, old friend, have a problem. You have a habit of falling in love with your Autobot slaves, and in the Decepticon empire, that’s a very unhealthy habit to have.”

He was unwise enough to pat his hand sympathetically on Soundwave’s knee, a hand which Soundwave promptly pushed away. Starscream was quick to lean back, his hands raised in surrender. “It’s not as if you have to defend yourself to me, you know. I know what it’s like to have feelings for an Autobot that... are not complete hatred.”

He dispersed the cube he’d been toying with and rolled off his seat, wandering over to the window. The last of the sunset was long since gone, and the base grounds were too well lit to allow for much starlight. Starscream, though, was clearly not interested in the sky. Soundwave watched him lean back against the glass, optics seeking the white shuttle parked somewhere out there on the sand.

“Megatron hates that we have those feelings. He’d like to rub them out, if he could, but he can’t. And since he can’t, he settles for using them to keep us right *here*.” Illustratively he pressed his thumb down onto the center of his open palm. “Do you know how much I enjoy being made a tool? Not so much, really. Everything that I do, everything that I hope to achieve in this empire - that I fought for, by the way - is measured against the one thing Megatron knows I want and therefore the one thing he will always keep out of reach. He does it to control me, but not just that - he’s trying to

*own* me. Own all of us. Megatron gets so easily jealous, and he wants us to love only him. Wants the whole planet to love only him, but they don't, not lately. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that."

"Starscream, pleased by this?"

"Soundwave, what kind of monster would I be if I were *pleased* by any threat to the planet's peace?"

"Regardless of own popularity."

"Oh?" Starscream affected a look of well-simulated surprise, then waved his hand negligently.

"Well, that's neither here nor there. We were talking about you - you and your Autobots. Haven't had much luck with them, have you? The first four... well; to think I spent all this time assuming you were just embarrassed by their deaths. But it went deeper than that; you actually cared about those little bots. You fought to keep them alive and you grieved over their dead frames. What would Megatron think if he knew?"

"Megatron, already aware of operating protocols. Carrier programming driven to domesticate and nurture cassette models. Frustration at failure, nothing more than logical consequence of protocols."

"So that's the line you fed him. Seems plausible enough, unless you consider slave number five, who is no cassette. Only a blind mech would miss the way you two look at each other, and though you wouldn't know it from his governing policies, I assure you that Megatron's not blind. I know he's watching you, and you know it too; it's got you nervous enough that you actually packed up your slave and brought him along to a combat mission. You must be so afraid you're going to lose this one too, aren't you?"

"Suggestion, Starscream arrive at point."

"Wouldn't it be nice, Soundwave, to not have to be afraid? To fall asleep beside Jazz, knowing he'll always be yours, that no one will ever take him away again? If Megatron were just gone -"

Soundwave shot to his feet. "*Out.* Now."

"There's no need to shout," Starscream said sweetly. "We're just talking."

"Starscream's topic: treason."

Starscream laughed aloud at that. "Don't be absurd, Soundwave. You are Megatron's most loyal servant. If I were plotting a coup, you are the last mech I'd ever try to collude with. *Everybody* knows that. But you're upset, so I'll go. We should both get some good recharge, it's a big day tomorrow." He sauntered his way back over to the door, brushing too close against Soundwave's frame. He could feel the warmth from Starscream's vents, hear the hum of his systems, and worst of all, feel the movement of air when Starscream leaned in to whisper, "You're actually not so boring, anymore."

That was all. The door whooshed open, and then Starscream was gone.

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## on a mission

The mission started when Starscream booted them all out of berth at first sunlight, turning a deaf audio to the grumbles of his team. They weren't the only ones unhappy. Jazz wasn't a morning mech on the best of days; add to that the dizzyingly short rotations of Earth, which none of them had calibrated to yet, not to mention how he'd had stayed up way too late relentlessly (and unsuccessfully) begging Soundwave to tell him what happened with Starscream, and Jazz did not cope well. He complained bitterly when Soundwave dragged him out of recharge, then promptly dozed off on his shoulder for the flight over the Indian Ocean.

Their arrival was uneventful. The seekers zeroed in on the attack site first, then swept the surrounding jungle in ever-expanding circles, while Skyfire kept to a holding pattern at much higher elevation. Not until Starscream was completely satisfied that it was safe to land did he give the order - or rather, have Thundercracker transmit the order to Skyfire for him. The seekers had all landed and transformed by the time the Autobot touched down, allowing Soundwave, Jazz, and Hook to disembark.

"Well?" Starscream said impatiently, hardly had Hook's pede left the ramp. "What's he hanging around for? Tell the Autobot to get back to Decepticon quarters; we will send orders for them to dispatch him when you need a ride back."

Hook raised his optic ridges. "Uh, what am I, your translator? You can tell him yourself."

"I'm busy, being team leader, which you are not. So tell him to get his useless taxicab self out of here before it gets shot or worse." He made to turn away, then added in a lower voice for Soundwave, "Last chance, Soundwave. Sure you don't want to send Jazz back with him? Nobody here is going to guarantee his safety."

"Jazz stays with me."

"As you say." He had the nerve to grace Soundwave with a knowing smile, which did not go unnoticed by Jazz, before moving on to the factory itself. Skyfire's engines roared back to full power, something that he somehow made sound polite, and he accelerated down the clearing and lifted off. The shuttle, when emptied of extra weight, could book impressive speed and he was out of audioshot almost immediately. Once he was gone Earth seemed unnaturally quiet, even though Soundwave knew the jungle was anything but silent. It was just strange, that was all, to be away from the dense crowds of Iacon, out among the wilderness of their organic colony. The twelve of them were very far from their homeworld, far from their local base, far from even a populated human city. Whatever happened now, they were on their own.

"All symbiotes, eject." His chest opened and Laserbeak, Ravage, and Rumble unfolded out into their root modes; two of them brimming with eagerness, one less so now that he'd been dragged away from the Stunticon library of action movies. "Laserbeak, Ravage, conduct reconnaissance of immediate surroundings, take note of environmental anomalies or potential threats. Full caution recommended; area deemed clear by seekers but enemy's location not yet determined."

Their ends of the link blipped with understanding and consent, and both dove into the shadows of the jungle. "Rumble, aid in exploration of factory grounds; prioritize interior of human buildings,

report findings.”

“Yes boss. Ugh, it’s creepy though. I’ve played more than one video game that looked just like this.” He scowled suspiciously at the ruined compound as they drew closer. “Why do I get the feeling that a zombie Insecticon is about to come stumbling out from one of those shadows?”

“Don’t worry, Little Blue,” Jazz pipped helpfully. “There’s many larger mechs around here that look much bigger and tastier than you, I’m sure.”

“Shut up, Jazz.”

He was right that the factory site looked an awful mess. Most of the buildings wore at least a few laserfire scars, but shooting had not been the primary method of attack. Whole chunks of equipment lay strewn across the grounds, twisted and torn, the ends all gnawed to shreds by sharp metal teeth.

The three Insecticons may not have ever been that choosy about their diet, but Soundwave knew from experience that their swarm of drones would eat anything around them, including living organic material, plain earth, and metal. And the wreckage of the factory showed a lot of toothmarks.

“It was for processing tradiitional fossil fuel,” Starscream was telling the others, as the seekers poked through the wreckage. “From an offshore rig, just off the coast. The Unified Nation allowed them to keep twenty percent and have the privilege of local employment, but the rest was due to the Decepticon empire. Going by everything I’ve read, they hit the factory right when output had topped off their storage tanks, before the Stunticons made their scheduled pickup. Obviously they were watching closely.” Something startled a few birds into taking flight from the trees, and Starscream’s head jerked up, followed by clearing his throat and pretending that hadn’t happened.

“So the million credit question is ‘where’d they go?’” Ramjet pointed out. “Cuz, it isn’t here.”

“And they’re not in the trees - at least, I don’t think,” Thundercracker added. “Forgot how slugging impossible it is to scan for the enemy in places like this, there’s too much interference from all the little organic critters running around, throwing off their own heat signals.”

“They may not be hanging around here, but they’re in the jungle; they have to be. We have continuous video surveillance from the satellite since the nanoklick this place put up a distress signal, and nothing bigger than a lizard has shown its face on the outside edge of these trees. So they’re in there, somewhere - we just... don’t know exactly where.”

The last word had just left Starscream’s mouth when a soft but distinctly audible scuffle snapped everyone’s attention to an overturned vehicle lying against the nearest silo. Whether it was because of their vulnerable position surrounded by opaque forest, Starscream’s comment, or the toothmarks, Soundwave would never know, but instantly every mech in the immediate area had a gun out and pointing at the truck, lasers priming and ready to fire.

“Insecticon!”

“Drone!”

“Zombie!”

The only one that didn’t jump to point his weapon was the only one there that didn’t have one, Jazz. Looking more curious than cautious, he sidled toward the truck and tried to peer underneath for a better view. “Unless they’re building the drones a lot smaller these days, I don’t think one would fit under there. It’s probably just a wild anim- oh.” He dropped to his knees and finally got a clear look, visor lighting bright blue with surprise. “Would you look at that?”

Carefully he slipped his hands under the wreck and pulled them back, cupping them partly open to show the small creature inside. "It's a human!"

"Oh, is that all?" Starscream dropped his null rays, looking a cross between relieved and disgusted. "Ick, kill it."

"What? Why?" Hastily Jazz backed a few steps away from Starscream, hands held closely to his chest.

"Because- oh wait, I just remembered that you're a slave and I don't need to give you a reason. Squish it already."

"She's just a child, Starscream. What do you think she's going to do to you?"

Starscream cocked an optic ridge. "Still holding a soft spot for the little organics, Autobot? It's a little sad, because I think they've proved they don't feel the same way about you - what with their government betraying you and murdering your city guardians and all."

"That just another way of saying you couldn't have won the war without them?" Jazz shot back, and Starscream's optics narrowed.

"I *said* to kill it. If you won't, give it to me so I can."

Jazz was edging closer to Soundwave now. "Before you go to the trouble of getting blood and organic bits smeared under your pede, can I at least point out that this human might have information for us? She was obviously hiding from something; maybe that something was the Insecticons, and *maybe* she saw which way they went."

He'd made it to the safety of Soundwave's shadow, and though Soundwave had no intention of fighting Starscream over the welfare of a lowly human, Jazz was a different story and Starscream knew it. Impatiently he rolled his optics and huffed.

"Ugh, fine. Question the little meatbag and see if she's got something useful to say. I don't want to see her again, and she *really* doesn't want to see me again. Understood?"

"Understood," Jazz promised, and exhaled in relief when Starscream turned away. With the same care that Soundwave took when folding delicate foil sheets, he deposited his catch on the nearest raised surface and then knelt to better face her directly. "*Don't be afraid,*" he cooed reassuringly, picking the most popular of local Malay dialects. "*It's okay; we're not going to hurt you. You're safe now.*"

Not exactly reassurances Jazz was qualified to give, Soundwave thought, but they did at least succeed in getting the human to uncurl herself from the little ball she'd made of her body. Tall enough to be fully grown, and the long tangled hair showed no gray yet, at which point Soundwave rarely bothered trying to estimate age. Jazz had called her a child though, and since he'd had far more exposure to humans while on Earth, Soundwave assumed she must be relatively young. Ash and dirt was smeared across her face, and her expression was fixed in a kind of mute terror staring up at the both of them.

"*I'm sorry if we surprised you,*" Jazz apologized, his voice low and gentle. "*Actually, you surprised us even more, and the one with the ugly striped wings got scared. But never mind him. We're looking for some friends of ours - they look and sound like the flies you have around here. Just bigger. Did you see them?*"

At the description, the human nodded quickly, then burst into a frantic babble about the horde that

had descended upon them without warning, destroying their factory, consuming the processed oil and anything else that stood in their way.

*“Where are the rest of your people?”*

The human lowered her gaze, and said they had all fled into the jungle. Nobody had yet come back.

Jazz hummed a soft, sympathetic noise in the back of his vocalizer. *“And where did the flies go?”*

She scowled then, and spat something hard and angry that Soundwave couldn’t quite translate.

“Meaning, not completely understood.”

“I think it was something like ‘to hell’,” Jazz speculated. “Their mythological home for demons, monsters, and the worst of their own dead. So, good place for Decepticons.”

“Intelligence, not especially helpful,” Soundwave pointed out, and Jazz sighed.

“Ah well, she’s a civilian that was probably hiding in a barrel by the time the bug-cons bugged out, and who can blame her?”

Soundwave eyed Starscream, now on the far side of the compound and talking to Skywarp, but still casting the occasional glance their way. “Now, what will Jazz do with her?”

“Aw, I was sort of hoping we could keep her.” He beamed up at Soundwave’s expression. “Don’t you think she’s cute?”

“Jazz, speaking nonsense.”

“Right, because you never go around adopting others on a whim.”

“Jazz.”

“Okay, fine. Can you tell me where the nearest human city is? Getting her there is her only shot at survival.”

Soundwave consulted his own map files and cross-checked them against Earth’s internet. “Nearest settled town, 74 mechanometers distant.”

“Well she can’t walk that - not through an Insecticon-infested jungle anyway, not to mention the local predators.” He sat back on his heels, tapping his chin, then cocked his head slightly. “Do you hear water?”

Indeed there was a wide river on the other side of the factory, probably the reason for its existence here in the first place. After confirming with Soundwave that it did run to the coast and the human-settled harbor there, Jazz busied himself finding a water-worthy craft and carrying it back to the river. Soundwave watched him, bemused once again by this strange compulsion of Autobots to protect and aid humans. Even in spite of, as Starscream had pointed out, everything they’d done to Autobot City. Shockwave’s propaganda broadcasts may not go into much detail about it, but it was not really an exaggeration to say humans were the reason Autobots lost this war. Which made them, essentially, the reason he was now a slave.

Nobody would know it going by the way he deposited her so carefully on her raft, coaching her stay low and keep quiet while the current carried her to safety. He was probably, like Soundwave, aware

of the amused sideways looks from the seekers, and like Soundwave, probably didn't miss how the little human kept looking at the chains around his wrists. Earth government propaganda had taught the humans to hate the Autobots a long time ago, but Jazz had swiftly charmed her out of any fear and distrust, so by the time he was pushing her raft into the middle of the river, her face was alight with gratitude. He bent over, probably murmuring a final goodbye, before letting go and wading back to shore.

"Starscream correct," Soundwave pointed out, watching Jazz try to shake all the water out from under his armor. "Autobots, too sentimental for sake of humans. This sentiment, unmerited and misplaced."

"Before some of them lost this war for us," Jazz said simply, "others helped us *not* lose it, a dozen times over. I won't forget that. Besides, when was the last time I actually got to save a life?" He grinned, but the flippancy of it faded away to something more shy and genuine. "Thank you for letting me."

"Incident negligible."

"Well I'm grateful to my kind master anyway. My kind, understanding, reasonable -"

"Jazz."

"Yes?"

"Conversation with Starscream, private, and will not be repeated to you."

At which point Jazz growled and stomped away.

---

"... still insist on playing hide-and-seek, so it seems we have no choice but to humor them. Since Soundwave's spies have yet to unearth any new clues, we'll have to take a more aggressive approach to the hunt." Starscream directed a sideways look of disgust at Soundwave at this point, as if it were his fault. "We're going to flush them out of the trees whether they like or not. We'll deploy the two trines separately, in alternating reconnaissance flights over the jungle, flying low and hard. Spray a little gunfire into the trees now and then, make them think they've been found. The drones will panic and break cover; they always have before. And there you have it - no more hiding. Battle begins."

"Can't we just carpet bomb the whole jungle?" asked Dirge, looking as bored and impatient as the rest of the seekers who made up Starscream's audience. "Flatten their hiding place completely?"

"Remember Brazil?" Starscream asked in return. "I'll never make that mistake again. The trees burned for days, the smoke was even harder to see through than the fragging jungle had been. I will not give the Insecticons even better camouflage than they've already got. Cone trine takes the first sweep, circling eastward, and the rest of us wait here on standby if you get lucky. If you don't, we'll take the next loop. Any questions?"

Most of his seekers just shrugged, but an attentive Jazz quickly raised his hand and waved it. "Ooh! Ooh, me!"



“No questions?” Starscream said tersely, looking right at Jazz before turning away. “Okay then, we’re done.”

“Uh, excuse me,” Jazz continued blithely, “but what’s the plan to single out anyone who falls victim to those nasty little mindhack shells? If memory serves, their leader is generous with them. I was thinking we could all have a secret countersign phrase, something the Insecticons would never think you’d come up with. Like... ‘I love Megatron’.”

He beamed sweetly at Starscream, who returned his look with a stare of general loathing. Without speaking, he transmitted an electronic countersign frequency to all of them, which could be activated by any mech of free will and thus clear himself of suspicion. Jazz was left out of the broadcast, not being able to receive any transmissions, but Soundwave already intended to keep Jazz in sight at all times anyway.

“Seekers, get in the air. Let’s find those bugs.”

---

Starscream’s plan was a good one, but it did not produce the results he’d been hoping for. The sun climbed to the top of the sky, and the seekers harried and tormented the small creatures that lived in the treetops across most of the jungle, but still no Insecticons emerged. Below tree canopy level, Soundwave’s own reconnaissance agents were having no better luck. Ravage and Laserbeak roamed in ever larger concentric circles from the factory, examining the terrain as thoroughly as ever, but found no excitement other than Ravage getting to stalk and hunt a local deer.

They, at least, had their mission and an interesting environment to keep them occupied. Back in their temporary camp of the humans’ factory, Rumble didn’t even have that much. Soundwave watched him wrest an iron bar out of the wreckage and march up to Jazz, holding it up to him with all the authoritative air of a commanding general.

“I’m bored,” he announced petulantly. “Play with me.”

“Your command is my command.” Graciously Jazz bowed, and waited for Rumble to scamper halfway across the clearing before tossing the bar. “They get testy when split up, huh?”

“To some extent,” Soundwave affirmed. Rumble hurled the pipe back at Jazz with all his strength, but it was comparatively small enough that Jazz caught it easily in one hand.

“So where do we go from here? It feels like we showed up for a party, but the host has wandered off with all the music and snacks. What a drag. How long will we look before giving up?”

“Starscream unlikely to give up,” Soundwave said, unhappily aware of the larger political context. “A military victory right now, much needed.”

“So Thundercracker said.” Neatly Jazz caught Rumble’s next toss, but his gaze had moved over to Starscream, pacing under the far edge of the trees and looking more anxious with every passing breem. “What’s the matter, Megatron finally hit his limit and Starscream knows it?”

Soundwave would not stoop to acknowledge that, but Jazz just shrugged at his silence.

“No secrets there, I heard those guys on the street too, remember? The more you think about it, the more you realize this whole Insecticon mess came along at just the right time; Starscream’s always had the luck and timing of Primus on his side. But, only if he can find those bugs and make them sit still long enough to be defeated in battle. Otherwise he loses everything. Huh.” Jazz tilted his head and grinned at him. “This field trip just got ten percent more interesting. The only downside is that I kinda have to root for Starscream, since I’m here and don’t want to be eaten or anything. Must be a little harder on you, though.” Again he caught Rumble’s pipe and hurled it back. “Since you’re so loyal to Megatron and all.”

---

Still the day dragged on. Hook broke out their mid-cycle rations, and everyone was grateful to take a break from doing nothing to at least refuel. Soundwave was by now out of his usual crystallized treats, so instead he tipped a cube to Jazz’s mouth, feeding him in small and careful sips.

“So that’s what it looks like,” Skywarp remarked, staring at the two of them over his own cube. Languidly he licked a spare drop of energon from his lips. “Gotta say, it is kinda hot. Though I still don’t know what made you think of it in the first place. At our place, we make the slaves bring the fuel to us. Remember, Jazz?”

“I remember I spat in it every night,” Jazz said cheerfully. “Forgot to, once, and you complained it tasted funny.”

In spite of himself, Thundercracker snorted and had to cough up fuel that had gone down the wrong pipe, while Skywarp scowled. “And *I* just remembered why I had to beat and bang you every night, just to get a break from that endless train of what you thought were funny jokes.”

“Ahem. My *repartee* requires a certain level of wit for proper appreciation.”

“What’s that? A fancy word for ‘I’m a slave and suck my master’s wires on command’?”

Jazz’s visor flashed venomously and he opened his mouth with what Soundwave had no doubt would be a scathingly accurate indictment of Skywarp’s intelligence, character, and prowess in the berth, but Soundwave did not care to hear it aloud. They were not only heavily outnumbered by the seekers out here, but Starscream was serving as field commander and his direct superior.

“Jazz,” he remonstrated quietly, before his slave could utter a word, “not now.”

Unhappily Jazz subsided and shut his mouth with a snap, burying his comeback for some other time. As if to compensate, Skywarp’s fell wide open in disbelief.

“*Howdju do that?*” he demanded, using the group’s battle frequency Soundwave had arranged. All over the encampment, every Decepticon twitched and shot an irritated look at Skywarp. “*He just shut up, and you didn’t even have to hit him or nothin’!*”

Soundwave’s vents opened in a small sigh. “*Skywarp, witnessing it now.*” He tipped up the cube, allowing Jazz to finish the last of it. “*Soundwave’s training methods, superior.*”

Skywarp considered this as he gaped, turning - or trying to, anyway - this new idea over in an overworked processor before he turned to Thundercracker. “*Hey, can we start handfeeding*

*Fireflight when we get back home?"*

"Stop being a fucking perv, Warp," Thundercracker said flatly. "And let's go. It's our turn to fly recon again."

---

The sun crossed its apex, and began its descent to the western horizon. Jazz was napping against Soundwave's shoulder, while Rumble sprawled across his lap and glared balefully at the sky.

"Beak just commed me again, to tell me she found another trail of wreckage from the bugs that goes - where else? - absolutely nowhere. Hooray for Beak. I can't believe I fought Frenzy to come on this trip, this mission totally bites bits. We're having about as much luck finding Insecticons as we are that stupid missing mech in Iacon."

Against his shoulder plating Jazz shifted, dim blue light switching on behind the visor. "Who's that missing, now?"

"Uh... uh-oh." Rumble cringed at the look Soundwave gave him, then swiftly relocated himself to somewhere on the other side of the compound. Soundwave set aside his exasperation for his symbiote and met Jazz's look coolly.

"Not your concern."

"Ooh, a guessing game. Might as well; I'm bored, so let's play." He stretched and rolled over onto his front, resting his chin on Soundwave's knee joint. "Is it an Autobot? Well, as much as I wish that were so, we both know that if a slave had escaped Megatron would have blamed me and ripped me to pieces already. So is it a Decepticon? Surely not again, and anyway, I just saw all of you at Shockwave's party. That just leaves the civilians."

"Now, I know nobody's allowed to leave the city without a permit, but it *is* odd that you would notice just one single mech missing, before patrols even have a chance to catch him wandering the planet. Who's important enough to attract such prestigious attention from the great watcher-of-all Soundwave? A wealthy mech, maybe, someone from Shockwave's crowd of landowners. Or is it the opposite: a Starscream supporter that you've flagged for dissidence?"

Soundwave watched Jazz ramble his way through the list without blinking, perfectly impassive. Jazz kept squinting at him anyway, looking for hints of a reaction that Soundwave would not give. "Is his armor... blue? No, red. Green! Alt-mode ground, air, or equipment? Is it somebody you've met personally? Is it someone *I've* met?"

He rolled again, arching his back up into that posture he was so fond of, peering at Soundwave upside down as if that would give new insight. "Of course, the really intriguing question isn't so much *who*, but *why* a missing civilian would worry you. They're nothing, right? Just a crowd to pay taxes and get told what to do, or at least that's how Megatron sees it. Right? Yet one goes missing, and you worry, worry enough to actually search for him. A fascinating mystery... but there's a lot of neutrals in Iacon, so this game is going to take a while. Don't worry, I'll keep working on it though."

Just like Soundwave knew he would, Jazz rolled back over onto his front again, up onto his knees to

better face him. He also knew Jazz would flash him that maddening, sinister smile. “You always say ‘not your concern’ when it’s something you *really* don’t want me know.”

---

Accustomed to his busy work cycles back on Cybertron, Soundwave was beginning to despair that a single Earth day could be so short and yet seem to last so long. After humoring Rumble with another game of catch, until his cassette got bored with that too, Jazz sat back down by Soundwave with a discouraged thump. “Well, that’s killed another hour, for what it’s worth. I don’t mean to hurt anyone’s feelings, Soundwave, but I’m starting to feel let down. I’d assumed a Decepticon mission would be a lot more exciting. Shouldn’t Starscream have stabbed someone in the back by now?”

He raised his voice for that last part, to ensure the nearby Starscream would hear, and he did. “Turn around, Autobot,” he suggested, toying with a laserblade, “and maybe I can oblige you.”

Jazz retaliated with a mock expression of injury, and Soundwave took this chance to intercede. “Starscream, cassettes ranging farther from ground zero than preferred, and still no sign of enemy. Suggestion, redirect objectives of their mission to arranging sensor grid around encampment.”

“A security fence?” Starscream scoffed. “I didn’t come all this way to fight a defense strategy, Soundwave, we’re a strike force. We strike.”

“Strike *out*,” Jazz muttered, but quieted when Soundwave nudged him.

“Other options available?” He nodded toward the sinking sun. “Less than half joor of daylight remains. Starscream, anxious to flush drones at night with current strategy? At location of their choice?”

His logic was sound, and he knew Starscream knew it by the way he growled so unhappily. His fist slammed into a wall, and his vents huffed in frustration. “Set up your net, no more than forty mechanometers from where we’re standing. I want plenty of warning if those cowards try to attack in the middle of the night. I had been feeling generous, and was going to carry out a mission of capture-not-kill for those three buzzers, let them explain their actions to Megatron. But that’s officially off the table. As soon as I have those wretched Insecticons in my sights, I’ll be shooting to kill and I won’t worry about who gets in the way. Smart-aft Autobots most of all.”

“If I see any, I’ll tell them,” Jazz offered helpfully.

Starscream harrumphed and stomped away, leaving Soundwave to send new instructions to his symbiotes. By his side, Jazz opened his mouth.

“No.”

“You didn’t even let me -”

“Verbalization unnecessary, your request known. Jazz, not permitted to scout for enemy.”

“But why not? I’m bored, and I’m on this mission too!”

“Jazz, not on this mission.”

“Then where am I? The French Quarter?”

“Jazz, not a combatant.”

“Which I’ll explain very nicely to the Insecticons, when they finally decide they’re done waiting and attack en masse. Why won’t you let me help? Believe it or not, I did actually use to do this for a living. I also fed myself. I consider it a golden era.”

“Jazz will not leave my sight for duration of time in jungle.”

“Is that because you’re worried about what the Insecticons will do? Or what I’ll do?”

“Both,” Soundwave said simply. “This discussion, now concluded, as is symbiotes’ search. From now forward, Decepticon strategy is defense. Insecticons will come to us, or there will be no battle at all.”

---

The sunlight was fading even faster than Soundwave had predicted, thanks to a large swathe of clouds building on the western horizon. The sky that had been so flawlessly blue since their arrival on Earth was, for the first time, threatening otherwise. Around them, a cool breeze ruffled through the trees. Jazz stood close to them, vents opened wide to the fresh air, and inhaled deeply.

“It’s gonna rain,” he murmured.

“Probability, exceeding 87%,” Soundwave agreed, but Jazz shook his head.

“Nah, it’ll happen for sure. I can smell it. Always did like Earth’s rain, though it can get uncomfortably extreme in this part of the world. Don’t one of the bug cons have some trick with lightning?”

“Shrapnel,” Soundwave affirmed gloomily. “Able to amplify and control electrical currents in atmosphere.”

“Probably what they’re waiting for, then.” Jazz turned away from gazing at the clouds to face him. “Nervous yet?”

Soundwave shook his head. “Reconnaissance, cleared jungle. Sensor ring nearly secured. When or if Insecticons emerge, will be unable to breach anywhere close to encampment without alerting Decepticons.”

“If you say so. But it seems that lately, the Insecticons have been getting pretty good at doing what everyone else thinks they can’t do.” Looking uneasy, Jazz hesitated and opened his mouth again. “Can I -”

“Jazz,” Soundwave warned, but his slave shook his head.

“I won’t start arguing about helping again. But, can I at least take these off? Please?” Hopefully he lifted his shackled wrists. “I’d feel better knowing I’ve at least got my own two fists to fall back on, if things go really south.”

Soundwave considered this. He did not expect that any attacking Insecticons would get anywhere close to Jazz, and even if they did, his weaponless slave wouldn't have much of a chance, chains or no chains. But, Jazz had asked for permission, instead of simply slithering out of them like usual. For that reason, Soundwave would reward Jazz by humoring him on this. Seekers might be watching, so he beckoned Jazz closer and unlocked them himself, storing them away in his subspace.

"Jazz," he reminded, "will not engage in any combat. This precaution, very unnecessary."

"For once, I hope you're right and I'm wrong."

---

The sun set, plunging the jungle into twilight. Probably the moon and stars were beginning to show, but there would be no seeing them tonight, not from under those swelling stormclouds. It was an ominous picture, to look up, but his cassettes' sensor grid was in place, motion detectors regularly blipping at each other and registering no outsized activity. The Decepticons could not be attacked without warning; they were safe. Everyone else seemed to have accepted they'd done as much as could be done, and were settling themselves wherever comfortable for the night. Waiting for his other symbiotes to return, Soundwave watched Rumble and Jazz play near the river. Jazz, with some egging on from Rumble, was showing off with cartwheels and backflips.

Ravage melted out of the shadows and flopped to the ground at Soundwave's pedes, physically tired but his thoughts flush with the thrills of stalking unpredictable organic prey. Laserbeak, floating just behind, perched on Soundwave's shoulder in equal exhaustion. Both were apologetic for their lack of success, which Soundwave wordlessly brushed aside. They had done what they could, and anyway, it was not Soundwave's future standing with the empire that was riding on this mission.

"Whoa, check it out!" Rumble raved, drawing Soundwave's attention back to the riverbank. A sizeable cloud of tiny glowing dots had begun to congregate around them, drifting up from the plants. "Where'd all these lightbulbs come from? What are they?"

"All that time on Earth, and you never saw a firefly?" Jazz asked, surprised. "Well, I guess you wouldn't find too many at the bottom of the ocean. Beachcomber told me they like places like this, and they like it best when there's no moonlight."

Soundwave had seen them, but never paid much attention to the tiny insects. Certainly he'd never seen so many in one place; there must have been hundreds floating through the dusk. With no competition from the moon, their bodies glowed a more brilliantly intense green-gold he'd ever seen in them before. Fascinated, Rumble watched one of them land on his arm plating and walk up his armor, blinking away just like any of Iacon's city lights.

"So they're organic... but they use electricity too, like us. Cool. I wanna put some in a jar, take 'em home to show Frenz."

"Ah, won't work, Little Blue," Jazz said sympathetically. "Fireflies are meant to be free. Put 'em in a jar and they'll die for sure." He looked at Soundwave and made accidental optic contact, then quickly looked away. "You'll be better off just taking him some videos."

Rumble looked disappointed but nodded, already recording. He had no shortage of good shots; the

fireflies were clustering more closely around Jazz, flashing and winking at one another in a glittering green orbit. He spun a slow circle, and they floated in lazy echo around him.

“They like me,” he laughed, and tried it again turning the other way. It was probably more accurate to say that they liked their reflection in Jazz’s polished armor, their little lights bouncing off his black and white plating, but whatever the reason, Jazz had collected a swarm of followers. He grinned at Soundwave through the glow and took a few prancing steps closer. Music welled out of his speakers, some song about fireflies, and seamlessly he moved into a slow, languid dance. Tired though she was, Laserbeak perked up at the sight and promptly glided to join him, swooping around and through the cloud of light in her own kind of dance. The fireflies scattered some, but by now Jazz wasn’t holding back anyway. Free from his chains, he leapt and spun and twisted into his usual fantastic contortions - nothing Soundwave hadn’t seen before, but here in this exotic setting and bathed in a thousand flickering lights, the dance took on a surreal beauty all its own. In the corner of his vision Soundwave saw Thundercracker’s mouth hang open, and blindly he groped through air until he found Skywarp’s shoulder and shoved it to get his attention. Skywarp started to protest, saw what his wingmate was looking at, and promptly shut up and stared.

Soundwave’s spark swelled in his chest. Jazz’s dance was getting more and more elaborate, though he knew perfectly well Soundwave wasn’t the only one watching. He didn’t care about the seekers, he was watching just Soundwave, dancing just for him. A fierce surge of territorial pride gripped Soundwave like only one of his kind could feel; Jazz was so beautiful and graceful, and so eager to perform for him. He was *his*, after all this time, and Soundwave wondered how he could have not noticed before.

Soundwave was done waiting.

Silently he held out his hand to Jazz, who needed no explanation. Without hesitation he danced his way across the distance between them and put his hand in Soundwave’s, unafraid. Away from the fireflies, away from everyone, Jazz followed Soundwave into the darkness under the trees, and the wind rustled the leaves in expectation. Neither spoke, and soon enough they were busy using their mouths for other things.

Strange, how easily it happened here in the alien jungle, so far away from everything they knew.

For once, Jazz was in no mood to play games. For once, there was no indecision for either of them, no more pulling away, no stopping. There was only him, and Jazz, and the tree they nearly uprooted for all he was grinding Jazz against it with such force. Jazz compensated by pushing back from it and throwing his whole weight on top of Soundwave, and Soundwave let himself sink to the earth without struggle. Electricity surged and crackled in both their bodies, leaping from Jazz’s exposed joints into his own and then flowing right back into Jazz, their first true interface. Jazz was perfect, teasing and toying Soundwave in all his favorite ways, but still submissive, still willing to be guided and positioned. Soundwave had him every which way, there on the jungle floor, kneeling, standing, in his lap; no matter how much energy he spent there was still another surge of electricity ready.

For once, Jazz didn’t fight the pleasure. For once he slid toward overload as easily and eagerly as Soundwave, swallowing soft moans and gasps and still thrusting himself against Soundwave’s joints for more. Soundwave thought they must be making up for the entire year of waiting just in this one night, as if they’d started and couldn’t stop now if they tried, not that either was interested in trying.

Vaguely he noticed he was wet, and that rain was drumming hard against his armor, and wondered when that had started. It wasn’t bothering Jazz any. Soundwave could feel his body seizing in readiness for the coming climax, his hands gripping the edges of Soundwave’s plating.

For once, Jazz went into overload. Sparks erupted from his joints and sizzled against the rain, his visor going pure white. All control lost, his internal systems firing on their own accord, his speakers

came to life with spontaneous music that filled the air around them. Soundwave still didn't understand it, but that didn't matter.

Because for once... he thought the music was beautiful.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters



## on the battlefield

*"It was," Rumble said much later, "kind of on the loud side. Like, disturbingly so considering this is you we're talking about. I don't even think I'll need to harass you for details; I got a pretty good idea of how it went down... the first time, the second time, the fifth time -"*

*"If Rumble disturbed," Soundwave replied calmly, "perhaps in future consider not eavesdropping."*

*"Eavesdrop? Soundwave, I had to dial my audios back. The whole jungle was thumping. Seekers were laughing themselves sick over it, too."*

*"Seekers, not my concern."*

*"Well I am; all five of us are. And Jazz is ours too. How could you block us out of that, tonight of all nights? Won't you ever let us in to share?"*

*"Another time," Soundwave promised, dropping an affectionate pat on his symbiote's head. "This much, guaranteed. However, this night private experience desired."*

Unappeased, Rumble crossed his arms and settled into a pout right there on Soundwave's chest. Just outside range of touch from Soundwave's pedes, oblivious to their silent conversation, Jazz was reclining against a steel pillar and brushing Laserbeak's wings. He had a relaxed, dreamy look on his face, and every now and then he'd catch Soundwave's optic and let slip a secretive little smile just for him.

*"Ugh, just look at him," Rumble griped. "Making those stupid goo-goo eyes and everything. Last time he looked like that, it was because we pumped him full of drugs. How did you do it? After all this time, how did you... make him want to?"*

*"To symbiotes, this already explained. When Jazz ready, Jazz would come to me. Tonight, Jazz ready."*

*"But why?"*

Why indeed? Discipline, affection, trust, patience... these had all been factors that made Jazz's surrender inevitable, and therefore no surprise to Soundwave at all. But why tonight, out of all the nights?

*"Unknown," he admitted. "The time had come. Game, now at end."*

*"Game?"*

*"Never mind. Rumble, prefers to recharge in open or dock for night cycle?"*

Rumble squinted curiously at Soundwave, but shrugged it off rather than bother to care. *"Eh, docking I guess. My joints'll just rust if I spend the night out here."* He rolled his optics at the pouring rain, still falling in heavy torrents around their cramped shelter of an old loading dock. *"No inches here to spare anyway."*

Wedged into the only dry square of land to be found with five seekers and a cranky Constructicon,

Soundwave could well understand his meaning. It was only a shame that he couldn't retreat to somewhere else too. He opened his chest and Rumble tucked himself inside, and Soundwave debated whether to call back the other two as well. Both had sharp senses and made good monitors, but with the sixth seeker atop the building to serve as lookout, space so tight, and their exhaustion so evident, he settled on commanding them to return. Better to ensure they'd have their full rest and recharge for the coming battle. Obediently Ravage and Laserbeak folded into his chest, leaving Jazz empty-handed. He grinned and crawled up between Soundwave's legs, settling his chin where Rumble had been seconds earlier.

"I guess that's that. Everybody snug and sound in their sleeping bag?"

"Affirmative. As for Jazz's recharge, expectation is that you -"

"- will wriggle out of your grasp like usual, and then maybe draw mustaches on the seekers' faces?"

"Try again."

"Stay right here and not cause trouble."

"Better."

Jazz grinned in a resigned way, then squirmed and stretched himself forward to plant a small kiss on Soundwave's face mask. "I'm pretty tired anyway. For... reasons. Night-night, don't let the bedbugs bite."

The light in his visor dimmed out of existence, and Jazz dropped into recharge right there on top of him. Soundwave didn't mind in the least. He draped one heavy arm over his slave's frame, shuttered his visor, and did the same.

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"ndwave! Wake up, wake *up*. For Primus' sake, Soundwave, come on!"

His recharge sequences fragmented, booting him abruptly into consciousness, and Soundwave's visor flickered on. The weight on his frame was gone now, Jazz was huddled beside him and pushing urgently at his frame, trying to shake him, and again stage-whispered a plea for him to wake up.

"Jazz, stop." He consulted his chrono, and found that only two of Earth's hours had passed; the night cycle was not even half over. "More recharge needed than this."

"That's right, not much fun is it?" Jazz couldn't resist pointing out. "To get shaken awake at some unholy hour, serves you right after all those -"

"Jazz, reason for waking me?"

"Oh, right. You know the Insecticons? They're here."

That was enough to clear away the lingering recharge subroutines, and Soundwave sat up straight and looked around him. The night, however, was quiet. Well, not quiet exactly - the rain was still pouring down and making its own racket, but there was no indication of anything moving out in it.

Around them, the rest of the strike team was in deep and peaceful recharge.

“Okay, they’re not here right in front of us,” Jazz added quickly, when he saw the way Soundwave looked at him. “But they’re here, I know it - I heard them.”

Soundwave could hear nothing but the monsoon raging around them. But it was better to err on the side of caution, so he hailed their lookout’s frequency.

*“Ramjet, report. Presence of enemy, detected?”*

*“Sorry, are you C.O. of this mission now?”* was Ramjet’s rather testy response. *“Do you demand ‘Ramjet, report?’ I must have missed that memo.”*

“Soundwave...” Jazz hissed, tugging at his arm and still staring out into the dark like it was going to attack any second. He didn’t lower his voice as much this time and the nearby Skywarp stirred.

“Whasgoin’ on?” he mumbled, which had the effect of waking Thundercracker next to him.

Starscream, meanwhile, sat up straight and alert, probably because he’d just received a hail of his own.

“What is it, Ramjet?” he asked crisply, followed by a few seconds’ pause and then an extremely annoyed glare turned toward Soundwave.

“No presumption of your authority intended,” Soundwave said hastily, before Starscream could get too enraged. “Only seeking confirmation. Jazz reports hearing Insecticon activity.”

“I *did* hear them,” Jazz insisted. “What, your lookout didn’t? Seriously? How deaf can a seeker be?”

“Watch it, Autobot.” Dripping wet and looking pretty irritable about it, Ramjet landed with a thump on the ground level, shoving Jazz on the shoulder hard enough to make him stumble. “Or this lookout might accidentally mistake you for an Insecticon and pull this very itchy trigger I got here.”

“That action, ill-advised,” Soundwave warned quietly. Unfazed, Jazz crossed his arms and glared back.

“Shooting me does not make you less bad at your job. How could you not hear all that?”

“Jazz, hears Insecticons now?” Soundwave asked quickly, before Ramjet gave in to the temptation to seriously injure Jazz.

“Well- no,” he admitted, and every seeker there groaned. “But I did! It was loud enough to wake me up, and I know it was them. It was that creepy click-click-click sound they always make.”

Soundwave hesitated, and glanced back to Starscream. “Jazz, possesses highly advanced audio components.”

“He also possesses a highly advanced agenda in making shit up to ruin our recharge.”

“That’s not- well okay, that is true,” Jazz had to acknowledge. “But not tonight! I swear it, not tonight. Why would I? I have every interest in surviving this night.”

“Funny,” Starscream drawled, “I don’t have the same interest.”

“Starscream, I heard them!”

“Oh, fragging Primus on a pocket chip,” Hook snapped, hauling himself off the ground in a huff. “You’re all awake anyway! Would it kill you to fly one lap over the trees? If the slave really did hear them, then they can’t be far.”

Starscream opened his mouth to tell Hook off, and Soundwave cut him off with a discreet comm. “*Starscream, reminder: your victory, much needed. Nothing will be lost by looking.*”

Starscream’s optics glowed dangerously, but since Soundwave was right he really had no retort. “Oh alright!” he barked, now thoroughly exasperated. “Just to *shut everybody up*, we’ll look. Seekers, in the air.”

“Which trine?”

“All of us. Might as well get it over with, and cover as much ground as we can. Cone trine take east, and we’ll do west. For your sake -” Starscream paused by Jazz to loom with appropriate menace, poking one fingertip in the center of his chest. “You better pray we find something.”

Jazz, for once, said nothing, and was pushed aside as all six of them stomped out into the rain and transformed. Engines roared to life, orange glowing unnaturally bright in the darkness, and they took flight. With just the three of them left behind, the rain seemed even louder, the night darker. Feeling rather uneasy, Soundwave ejected all three of his symbiotes, wishing now that he’d at least left Ravage out. Ravage’s audios were even more sensitive than Jazz’s, and if there was anything to hear he’d have heard it. Again he checked his motion sensors, but still no outsized activity had been logged.

Jazz was pacing back and forth, not seeming to notice he was doing it out in the rain. “I heard them, I know I did,” he muttered. “I was even in recharge but I heard them, that’s how loud they were... and now I don’t. How’s that happen, anyway? They move fast, but not that fast.”

“Jazz, moving too close to forest,” Soundwave spoke up, when Jazz had almost disappeared from the scant light of their base. “Return now.”

“You believe me, right?” Jazz whirled around and fixed him with a pleading look. “You know I wouldn’t make up something like this... right?”

More than any other Decepticon on that team, Soundwave knew what a good lie Jazz could tell, how convincing he could be when he really wanted to. But Soundwave also knew Jazz.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “Jazz, believed. For this reason, you should move away from trees, remain close to me.”

Jazz didn’t seem to hear anything past the first word. He looked back from Soundwave to the trees again, still shaking his head in frustration. “I heard them, I was so sure of it. I was in recharge, and I heard them, it was so loud it woke me up. I sat up and I -”

He stopped short, with a look in his visor that caught Soundwave’s attention. “Jazz?”

“She said they went to... hell.”

“Does he plan on saying anything that makes sense?” Hook growled, and Soundwave held up his hand for silence. Jazz dropped to his knees in the mud, then even further so he could press one audio sensor to the earth. Immediately his visor flared bright blue in comprehension, and alarm.

“They’re undergrou -”

The ground underneath exploded upward, and Soundwave didn't have to worry about looking for the Insecticons anymore.

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So many drones swarmed over him, Soundwave could not feel the rain. He and Hook both were immediately surrounded from all around and above, the noise of the storm drowned out by their high-pitched hissing and clicking. He didn't even have to try to aim, he just activated the sonic cannon on his shoulder and the blast cut a wide swathe through the wall of bodies. More filled their place in the next second, hideous things mashed up from bits of Earth machinery and scavenged Cybertronian metals, the tiny points of their legs scrabbling against his armor as they tried to crawl over him. Again and again he blasted them off with his cannon, flinging and punching away those he could reach, and making what seemed no progress at all. Though he couldn't see him, he could hear Hook not far away, rolling through a string of curses as he did the same.

In less than an instant, his three symbiotes had scattered and disappeared into the night, each of them darting under and around the enemy, outmaneuvering opponents more than twice their size in the way only their kind could. Soundwave promptly lost sight of them, but he still had their connection through the symbiotic link, felt them fleeing fast and unseen between the legs of unsuspecting enemies, and knew their status. Soundwave had no such link to Jazz, and now he couldn't even see him, not even when he managed to blast clear most of the drones between him and where Jazz was last standing. The night was too black, the rain playing merry hell with his sensors. He tried to switch optical input over to infrared, only for his optics to nearly get fried when the sky lit itself up in a pure white flash of lightning. An exceptionally colorful expletive from Hook's direction told him the Constructicon must have made the same mistake. Frantically Soundwave initiated a reboot, still swinging hard with his fists to knock aside any enemy within reach. Thunder followed lightning, the boom and crack as loud as any bomb, startling the drones and giving him the briefest of moments to resettle his balance. His reboot finished at last and Soundwave dialed up vision again, this time keeping to a cautious mid-gain that could see through some darkness but wouldn't crash from another overload of light. Jazz was nowhere to be seen. Was he already dead, ripped to pieces by hungry drones? He nearly panicked, but then he noticed that several drones were making a beeline to his left, ignoring the targets he and Hook presented because they were clearly intent on something else. He shoved and shot away the drones trying to swarm over him and followed, still struggling to peer through the rain more than his optics were willing to allow. The drones were obviously after something, but if it was Jazz he could see no sign of him. Then Soundwave realized he was looking too low; they were taking flight for a reason. Lightning flashed again and this time he saw Jazz clear as day, skimming up the side of a crane tower almost as fast as if he had wings himself. Somehow he got to the top before they could catch up to him and leapt straight off it without hesitation, freefalling to the earth several hundred feet below. Soundwave's spark nearly stopped, but Jazz must have had a plan because he hit one of the clumsily flying drones instead, producing an unholy screech of pain as it struggled to stay airborne with this new weight on its back. It wasn't up to the task and careened in wild zig-zags down toward the ground, crashing into another drone before they all tumbled to the mud together. Jazz promptly used his momentum to roll himself and his captive over, flipping the damaged drone at the other drones and crashing at least one to the ground. Soundwave was given no time to appreciate this creative counterattack before he was forced to deal with more of the enemy himself, who had finally noticed his presence.

Savagely he blasted apart the noxious creatures with sonic waves, and turned back to Jazz. This

wretched storm kept dousing the sky with floods of white light, bright as sunshine, then dropping back to opaque black. In the flashes allowed him, Soundwave found Jazz again, who had snatched a long metal pipe from somewhere in the humans' wreckage and turned it into the next best thing to a weapon that his slave could get his hands on. Through the rain he leapt and spun, darting back from the enemy's attacks in a graceful but lethal echo to the dancing style Soundwave knew so well. The staff twirled in his hands and smashed hard into the head of his confused opponent, then again from the other side before the drone was finally dazed and slow enough for Jazz to drive the pipe straight through its optical socket and into the core unit within. It dropped, dead, and Jazz whirled around to face any new threat that could be coming, his vents wide open and panting hard.

That's when he saw Soundwave, and his visor lit up with relief. "Soundwave!" He ran to close the distance between them, but just out of reach he drew up short and leaned back, suddenly wary.

"Wait - what's my favorite song?"

"Ain't Misbehaving," Soundwave recited unthinkingly, having heard the name so often it did not even require consideration.

"Who's it by?"

"Three candidate designations remembered: Fats Waller. Or Louis Armstrong. Or Billie Holiday."

Jazz's shoulders sagged with relief, his grin returned. "It was all of them. Everybody did that song."

This time he threw himself into Soundwave's arms and hugged him tight, and Soundwave relished the affirmation that Jazz was safe. This blindness with no symbiotic link was too much stress to bear in battle; he'd never make this mistake again.

"Without taking the time to point out that I was *totally* and *completely right*," Jazz wheezed. "I will now ask, what's next?"

"Down."

A spike in the comm channel and the shriek of incoming engines was Soundwave's only warning before the seekers roared into battle, spitting rows of strafe fire across the grounds. He hit the earth in a hard dive with Jazz still in his arms, his broad shoulders sheltering him best as he could. Jazz was fine but he wasn't so lucky; a sensor on his upper back blazed up with pain and then promptly shut itself off, and damage reports cascaded into his CPU. Jazz had to spit dirt out of his mouth, looking a little stunned, then wriggled out of Soundwave's grasp and saw it himself.

"What the- they hit you!"

"Damage, negligent," Soundwave said dismissively, trying to reroute some power from the automatically initiated self-repair back into weapons, which he would most surely need. Reports showed cracked armor and leaking lubricant fluid, but no major lines had been ruptured and all limbs were still functional.

"Is this *normal*?" Jazz looked horrified and was trying to put pressure on the leakage, but there was no time for that, not with the two of them lying out here in the open and the second trine incoming for another sweep. Soundwave shoved himself off the ground and dove for the only cover to be had, the nearest wall of the warehouse, dragging Jazz along with him. They made it just barely before the next attack run, mud spraying up into the air all around them from the force of bullets. Jazz spat some choice words about Decepticon teamwork but Soundwave ignored him, returning his full attention to the comm channels since the first time he'd come under attack.

"-ndwave, Soundwave, I know you're down there, answer me NOW!"

*"Soundwave here,"* he replied, comlink as even and measured as ever though his own vents were gasping almost as badly as Jazz. *"Insecticon drones, found using underground to hide presence."*

*"Well thank you for that, Director of All Things Fragging Obvious,"* Starscream snarled. *"Maybe you can also explain to me how it is that your useless spies missed every clue that the beasts had burrowed underground!"*

A rush of immediate denial came from both Ravage and Laserbeak, who were just as much included in the group's channel even if they couldn't speak for themselves. *"Symbiotes examined jungle completely,"* Soundwave said instead, in their defense. *"No sign of tunneling found."*

*"Maybe it was from within the buildings,"* Hook suggested, from wherever he'd managed to hole up.

*"Which the other brat was supposed to check!"*

*"I did check,"* Rumble said hotly. *"For Insecticons! But there weren't none of them, and no fraggin' holes into the middle of the earth neither! You think I'd miss somethin' like that?"*

*"Enough,"* broke in Thundercracker. *"Right now it doesn't matter, winning the fight matters."*

*"Stop talking and concentrate on shooting then,"* Starscream retorted. *"You too, Dirge, Ramjet- watch your flanks! And Skywarp, get that nose up before I shoot it myself. For that matter, all of you can stop flying like a pack of new-sparked rookies just because it's a little wet -"*

*"Starscream, we can't see!"*

*"Excuses!"*

Soundwave felt the vibrations of a deep crack shuddering through his struts, and at first he thought it was another roll of thunder. Then he realized more of the earth was being pushed up from underneath, somewhere between his cover and the first attack, fresh swarms of drones bursting up from below.

*"Oh for the love of-"* Starscream started, then cut himself off with a noise that was somewhere between disgust, frustration, and fury. *"Fine, if they want to come out to play, then we're going to play. Soundwave, Hook, keep on them from your current positions. Keep shooting and don't let up, force them to escape up into the air where we'll pick them off. Soundwave, I want Ravage and Rumble under the trees, to kill or roust any drones that try to use them for hiding. And as for Laserbeak, you tell her to flap those tiny wings and get on with finding the Insecticons. Crushing the drones means nothing until we can destroy their leaders. I want Kickback. I want Shrapnel. I want Bombshell. NOW!!"*

*"Cuz shouting's gonna make it easier to find them,"* Rumble muttered. Laserbeak's end of the link blipped with unhappy agreement, amended with enhanced sensory input of her environment to tell Soundwave her current situation. She wasn't moving to obey the orders, and with good reason. The little symbiote had taken shelter under a pile of building wreckage the second the seekers started laying down fire, and now she couldn't leave it. Overhead both trines were flying fast and furious, spraying heavy laser fire into the clouds of drones, much of which was obliterating the earth around them. The shot that had just grazed his own plating could splinter her wings to pieces, or tear straight through her spark casing.

*"Even if directive feasible,"* Soundwave said coldly, *"Laserbeak unable to move. Seeker's fire too thick to allow safe flight."*

*“Pitiful excuse for armor,” Starscream huffed, which earned a low growl from Ravage and a shout of indignation from Rumble.*

*“Hey! Why don’t you try being that size before you-”*

*“Fine. We’ll ceasefire for 10 nanokliks; she has that long to get her aft into the jungle.”*

*“Wait, what?” asked Dirge, startled, followed by Thundercracker’s, “We’re going to stop shooting for how long?”*

*“Beginning in five -”*

*“Starscream,” Soundwave protested, “this directive, too risky.”*

*“Four -”*

*“It’s not long enough!” Rumble wailed.*

*“Three -”*

Laserbeak was on the verge of panicking; she didn’t want to fly out into that hail of fire and even if she survived it, she didn’t want to find the Insecticons. If they found her first, she wouldn’t have a chance.

*“Two -”*

*“Starscream, there’s too many- not yet not yet!”*

*“One!”*

Soundwave flooded his link to Laserbeak with trust, confidence, and wordless faith in her speed. If she didn’t take this chance to escape the battleground, she might not live at all. *“Go, go now!”* he ordered, and she obeyed. True to Starscream’s command, the seekers shut down all gunfire, circling higher in a desperate bid to at least escape the grasping claws of drones if they couldn’t shoot back.

Laserbeak hurtled toward the cover of the trees, over, under and around drones that didn’t see her until it was too late and were too slow to follow. She made it in nine nanokliks exactly, and Soundwave was just preparing to tell Starscream when the seekers opened fire again anyway. For better or worse, at least she was out of the heaviest crossfire.

He sagged with relief against the wall behind him. For the last breem he’d been splitting his attention between his own surroundings and the comm channels, keeping just aware enough that he could shoot any drones that came too close and keep himself and Jazz alive. Now he shifted more attention back to himself, and became aware of Jazz’s quizzical scrutiny.

*“What happened? They stopped shooting, then they started again. What’s going on?”*

*“Soundwave and remaining ground team responsible for steering drones up to sky. Laserbeak, hunting for Insecticons.”*

The blue visor flickered with uneasy surprise. *“By herself? Is she going to be okay?”*

*“This, Starscream’s command,”* was all Soundwave could say, much as he didn’t like it.

*“But -”*

Whatever protest Jazz was about to vocalize cut itself short when the ground shifted and crumbled



underneath them, mud splitting itself apart as the heads of drones squirmed up above the surface.

“Uh-oh! Oh no, no no nonono bad drones! Stay down!” Jazz started whacking at the emerging heads with his staff but they were already all around them, a whole new swarm crawling up from underneath, too many to keep down. Soundwave blasted several into oblivion with a well aimed shot, then instinctively moved to trigger his thrusters to get away from the rest. A searing streak of seeker fire not too far above his head reminded him why that was impossible, not that the winged drones couldn’t have followed anyway. The only thing to do was run, as Jazz was already doing, and Soundwave followed him in a sprint through the gauntlet. Insecticon drones were everywhere, grasping at their legs, jaws clicking with eagerness to consume. Jazz was faster than any of them, moving like quicksilver through the night, vaulting over drones or sliding through the mud underneath them, sometimes twisting around one to hurl it straight into Soundwave’s kill zone.

Never once did he get in the way of the shot. Unthinkingly Soundwave let him lead, following him through the mangled gateway into a loading zone between buildings. It was a good idea, the narrower entrance would at least force their attackers closer together, but Soundwave couldn’t get there as fast as Jazz could. One managed to lodge itself onto his back, then another, denta gnawing at the edges of his armor. More sensors erupted in pain and Soundwave struggled, unsuccessfully, to reach behind him and pull the pests away. More took advantage of his slowed pace, crawling up over him from behind, right where he couldn’t aim his sonic cannon or even his own fist.

“Hey! Hey, over here!” Furiously Jazz banged his staff against pavement, then took off in a hard run down the length of the wall, scraping the pipe so hard against the bricks it drew sparks. The noise and light caught the attention of the simpleminded creatures and they jumped off Soundwave to follow Jazz, giving him the space to back up and aim properly. In the next second they were all dead. He turned around and did the same for any still coming through the gateway, and that was enough to earn them a small reprieve. Jazz returned to his side, panting but triumphant. “Not bad, right? Jazz and Soundwave two, world zero.” He extended his fist expectantly, to which Soundwave fixed a rather flat stare.

“Conclude battle, then celebrate.”

“Yes sir.” Light rolled behind that visor and he let the fist drop, but not his grin. “So now wha -”

“*Soundwave!*” Starscream barked. “*Why haven’t I been given coordinates for an Insecticon yet?*”

“*Laserbeak, still unsuccessful. Insecticons, possibly hiding anywhere.*”

“*Yes, yes, we’ve had that conversation a- watch yourself, Thundercracker! Tighten up those turns! -A few dozen times today already. But for Primus’ sake, they’re never that far from their pets, they can’t be far now!*”

Soundwave’s attention had split between Starscream, watching for more attacking drones, checking in on his symbiotes, and now half his gaze fell on Jazz. He was moving around the small space and periodically dropping to his knees, pressing his audios to the pavement now and then. He did not look happy.

“Jazz.” He patched external sound into his comm channel, switching to speaking out loud. “More enemy still underground?”

“Yes,” came the unhesitating answer. “I can hear ‘em.”

“*Ugh, you’re kidding me,*” Starscream groaned. “*You mean the Autobot is still alive?*”

“I’m scrappy like that,” Jazz said pertly.

*“More to the point,” Hook pointed out impatiently, “if you asked me whether any more of these trash-heap-construct pit-begotten drones could be stuffed underneath these buildings, I’d have said the fragging things would collapse.”*

*“Which means there can’t be many more of them,” Starscream estimated.*

*“Like, just three of them,” Thundercracker added.*

*“Hiding while their creatures tire us out, I’m sure. Time to dig the leaders out of their hive. Soundwave -”*

“Symbiotes, not burrowing underground to face Insecticons,” Soundwave snapped, before Starscream could even finish the sentence. “Not capable of maneuvering through such heavy subterranean material, let alone facing such a threat in meantime.”

*“Oh fine. Hook -”*

*“If you think I have the equipment to tunnel down into a nest of Insecticons, you must have me confused with Devastator himself.”*

“Send the Autobot,” Skywarp suggested with no small amount of malicious glee. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Negative,” Soundwave said darkly. “That option, infeasible.”

“It’s fine, Soundwave,” Jazz spoke up, right about the same time that Starscream was tersely reminding Soundwave he was in no position to refuse a direct command. Looking entirely untroubled, he sat back up and grinned at Soundwave. “I don’t mind.”

“This decision, not yours to make. Jazz not built for such a task, or for confronting named target.”

“Oh relax; I’m not talking about diving head first into the jaws of hungry Crazycons. I got a better idea. Have any explosives on you?”

Soundwave thought about the small weapons stash in his subspace, incidental backup should his primary integrated weapons fail. Two vibroblades, a handheld blaster, and three small detonators.

“Some,” he replied cautiously. “But demolition radius smallscale, unlikely to cause significant distress without exact knowledge of enemy’s location.”

“So we pump up the volume.” The next flash of lightning lit up in brilliant detail Jazz’s wicked smile, then it was gone, leaving only the sinister blue glow of his visor. “I think the humans can help us with that.”

“Meaning?”

“The propane tanks that helped run this place. Help me dump them into the biggest hole, and we’ll make the underside of this factory so clicking hot that they have to move out.”

The eager gleam in his optics made Soundwave uneasy. He searched for a reason to refuse the idea, and was irritated to find none. It was distasteful to his Decepticon nature to employ human tools, but like Jazz’s simple stick over there, they could be useful at unexpected times. In any case, it was better than letting Starscream send Jazz himself down into the earth to certain death.

“This plan, permitted,” he finally conceded. “Estimated risk?”

“Oh, too high to even bother thinking about it. Let’s go!”

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*“Soundwave to Rumble: report status.”*

*“Oh, you know, just hanging out in a wet tree, trying not to get killed by friendly fire, watching Ravage tear the everloving scrap out of drones in that special psychotic way of his - I’m just fragging fantastic. I’m in my happy place. And you?”*

*“Jazz estimates human facility contained fuel power units. This much confirmed in your earlier reconnaissance?”*

*“There are six propane tanks on the south side of the biggest building. Ooh, are you going to blow something up? Can I come?”*

*“Negative, remain in position as ordered by field commander.”*

*“How come you and Jazz are having all the fun on this trip?”*

“Concentrate attention on covering Ravage,” was all Soundwave had to say to that, and terminated the conversation. “South,” he informed Jazz, and moved in that direction, though he had to grasp Jazz by the arm and pull him back when Jazz tried to take point.

“Hey, what gives? I should go first; this whole thing was my idea!”

“Negative, Jazz will not lead.”

As quietly as he was able, Soundwave slipped around the edge of the warehouses and moved down the length of the wall, relying on darkness to keep them from the notice of drones. Periodically he had to put his arm out and nudge Jazz back to safety behind him.

“But I can’t see.”

“Jazz not required to see, only required to follow and remain close.”

“But you’re taller than me, so I could be in front and you could still see -”

“Jazz will remain behind me for reasons of superior cover.”

“Because that’s worked out so well for you; that laserfire wound is still seeping, you know. Nice friends you have up there. Furthermore, outside of the fact that I can’t have a weapon - which wasn’t my idea - there is only every other reason to let me scout ahead. First and foremost being that I am actually a trained scout. I’m quieter than you are. I’m smaller. I have better night vision.”

“This last one, known how?”

“It was a long war, Soundwave. I snuck past you often enough in the dark. When are you going to admit that I’m on this mission too? Even *Starscream* is more willing to let me help than you.”

“More willing to allow you to be killed.”

“Eh, it’s part of the job. Besides, it’s not exactly undiscovered territory, this, Autobots and Decepticons working together to clean up a six-legged mess. I seem to recall watching Megatron and Prime them very selves fighting side by side to take down the Insecticons, when they got to be too big a problem for your boss to handle. You remember that? I remember that.”

The fact that Optimus Prime was twice Jazz’s size and sported what was practically a small cannon on his hip struck Soundwave as being too obvious to mention, so he settled on holding up his hand for silence when he reached the end of the wall. As cautiously as he could, aware that his rigid build didn’t much allow for it, he tried to peer around the corner without exposing too much of his own body. A cluster of drones had gathered on some mangled machinery and were devouring the exposed power cables, enough of them to make trouble. He could shoot them, but even one blast from the cannon on his shoulder would attract attention from the hordes above and Soundwave had no time for another round of combat right now. He was debating on how to best handle the problem when he turned and found Jazz had vanished from behind him. Not again! Quickly he scanned around him, then remembered Jazz’s usual style and looked up instead. He just glimpsed a black pede disappearing over the rooftop, right up into the full view of any airborne drones and the full brunt of seeker fire that may or may not find him on purpose.

If Jazz had an enabled comlink just then, it would have exploded with Soundwave’s furious commands to return below at once. But he didn’t, and Soundwave had no quiet way to follow him. Instead he had to content himself with peering around the corner again. He still couldn’t see Jazz, but a flash of lightning illuminated something flying off the building, and seconds later he heard the startlingly loud clatter of metal striking the empty silo building. In retrospect he realized it had been a fistful of chains, just the right noisy decoy to attract the drones’ attention. Their antennae perked up and they scurried to investigate, vanishing into the veil of rain and night.

Seconds later, Jazz was dropping neatly down the edges of the building and landing with barely a splash before Soundwave, who lost no time in pinning Jazz swiftly to the wall by one shoulder.

“Restate portion of orders to remain close,” he said tersely, “that are unclear.”

“What? We needed a discreet way to get around them, I made it happen. It’s not like you could have done it. I think we both remember what happened last time you were on a rooftop.” Jazz kissed his fingertips and pressed them to Soundwave’s mask guard. “We probably have ten nanokliks before they get bored sniffing around and come back for the rest of their meal. Do you want to waste it being mad at me or finish the job?”

“After victory, long lecture on necessity of following battlefield orders waiting for you,” Soundwave promised, releasing his grip on Jazz.

“Can’t wait. But in the meantime, if you let me scout first, I won’t be able to pull that again.”

True enough. Soundwave pushed Jazz ahead with a brusque nudge and let him lead this time, following his slave’s swift and silent tread. Keeping to the cover of buildings as best they could, they crept their way through the compound and around the edge of the furthest building where, just as Rumble promised, stood six giant propane tanks. Less fortunately, a few drones had found them too and were already gnawing at the human-made pipes that hooked them to the plant. Jazz didn’t bother to wait before throwing himself into the open between them, spinning wide circles with both staff and his own body, knocking the unprepared drones into Soundwave’s fists.

“See?” Jazz panted, once they were satisfactorily crushed. “Now was that so hard, to let me help? To remember, for just a little while, that I did use to do this sort of thing all the time and that I do know how to look out for myself?” He thrust his staff into the frame around one of the tanks and yanked, leveraging enough force to snap its padlock apart. “Just admit it: I had a good idea, and I’ve

been very helpful tonight, and I am not nearly as weak as you like to pretend I am.”

He put his shoulder to the massive cylindrical tank, dug his heels against the earth, and pushed... absolutely nothing, except for perhaps himself deeper into the mud. Hardly surprising, considering the tank was as big as he was and probably heavier by far. Soundwave watched him scramble against the weight, wheezing and panting, for at least a klik before finally bracing one arm against the tank and pushing hard. Immediately it rolled over and off its framed base.

“Show-off,” Jazz grumbled.

“Jazz, perhaps not most suitable candidate to criticize showing off.”

“Funny.” The tank was heavy, but the slippery conditions and its own gathering momentum helped them pick up speed. Together the two of them rolled it across the grounds, moving back round to the epicenter of the fighting. “So, about this plan. If that really is the Insecticons down there, you know this won’t kill ‘em. It’ll just make ‘em mad.”

Soundwave found himself staring into the black jungle while Jazz spoke, treetops tossing back and forth in a frenzy. Laserbeak was still out there, her consciousness echoing reassuringly down the link. It had already occurred to him that even if it was the Insecticons down below, it wasn’t necessarily all three of them. She might still find one out there.

“Soundwave?”

“Expected reaction, understood.” They were getting closer, close enough to smell the scorched ozone of the seekers’ laserfire still scattering over the earth. He reopened his link into the battle channel. “Soundwave to Starscream, second ceasefire required.”

A chorus of dismayed shouts from the seekers promptly followed, until Starscream snapped at them to shut up. *“The last one nearly got half my soldiers killed, Soundwave. What’s it for this time?”*

“Soundwave, currently moving explosive material to drones’ main point of exit. Laserfire likely to interrupt this task in unpleasant manner.”

*“So where’s your sense of adventure? Just run the risk and I promise we’ll at least try not to aim for you.”*

“Starscream wants Insecticons roused or not?” Soundwave pressed irritably. “No other chance coming soon.”

*“What I want is to lead my squad without having to tiptoe around you and your tiny terrors. But fine; if you need it so badly, we can hold back firing for another ten nanos.”*

“Negative; longer duration required.”

“Soundwave!” Jazz yelped in warning, just in time for him to whirl around and shoot the pack of drones that had noticed their movement. More zithered out of the darkness, trying to land on both the tank and Jazz, and Soundwave had to aim very carefully before shooting them off. He couldn’t fight and help push the fuel tank both, but Jazz never took his hands off it, still struggling to roll it forward even under the assault of drones. Soundwave had no choice but to simply cover him, his own fists and weapons the only thing keeping them both alive, and even that may not be enough to protect them from above. Dirge rolled perilously close overhead, leading some of the enemy into Ramjet’s sights, his tracking fire plowing into the earth less than a mechanometer from the fuel tank.

“Hey!” he squawked, *“what’s the Autobot up to?”*

“*Starscream!*” Soundwave near snarled into the comlink. “*Cease fire. Now!*”

In the center of the clearing, the burrowing Insecticon drones had left a hive of holes from when they burst into the free air. There were so many that most had just collapsed into a few large gaping tunnels, ragged and muddy and ominously black to all sensors. The seekers stopped shooting just in time for Jazz to push the tank to its edge, where it tipped over and disappeared. Soundwave unsnapped his biggest detonator, triggered it, and pitched it in after.

Or would have, if a drone hadn’t picked that second to careen past and knock the grenade sideways into the mud. Promptly Jazz threw himself down to his hands and knees, groping in the darkness.

“Jazz, time-delay too short, move away!”

“No, I can get it! Just give me -” Frantically Jazz snatched up something, hurled it into the tunnels, and scrambled to a running start over the slimy mud. Soundwave grabbed his forearm and hauled Jazz right off his pedes, firing his thrusters to top power and rocketing them both away from the tunnel mouth. It was an escape barely made in time; the detonator hit zero and exploded, and then so did the humans’ propane fuel. The ground shook, huge chunks of it crumbling and caving in, and two of the nearest buildings cracked and collapsed. A massive pillar of flame shot up from underneath the earth, taking both Decepticon and Insecticon forces by surprise and causing the drones to momentarily scatter. Meanwhile Soundwave, who did not ever try to use his thrusters to fly parallel overground for good reason, crashed at near top speed into the pile of rubble that the warehouse had just become.

With mere boosting thrusters, even that top speed was nothing fatal. Soundwave took most of the brunt on his shoulders, and knew he was tearing the shot wound on his back, but for now he got away with a few minor collision damage warnings. Jazz had almost certainly collected some dents and maybe a stressed shoulder joint, but it was better than being incinerated, and for now he looked fine. Engine rumbling, vents wheezing, he groaned and rolled over onto his back. Rain still poured down, splashing in a blue haze against his visor. Both of them watched the mud slide and dissolve into rifts, then explode outwards as furious Insecticons fled their hiding place and launched into the night.

“I think- I *think*,” Jazz panted, “it worked.”

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The return of the Insecticons changed the patterns of the battle. Immediately the aimless flight of their drones turned to purposeful attacks, forming squadrons like huge black arrows against the flickering stormclouds. Shouts of the seekers coordinating against them filled the comlink channel, as they struggled to cut through the melee and aim for their real targets. From below, Soundwave could see nothing but the sparkle of crossfire, or black silhouettes against flashes of white lightning. Again it forked through the clouds, but this time the lightning seemed to reach right out of the sky, jagged lines of white fire all racing toward just one of those black figures. Then that same bolt of lightning reflected right back out to them all, amplified a thousand times over. Even with the gain on his optics dialed back as low as it was, Soundwave was blinded by the scorching light and lost all visual feed. Beside him he heard Jazz yelp, and could feel all his symbiotes recoil. And through the comlink, a howl of genuine pain.

*“He’s hit!”* Thundercracker cried, *“Skywarp’s hit!”*

“Suddenly I’m having a very good day,” Jazz murmured thoughtfully.

*“It’s okay- I’m fine,”* Skywarp gasped, his comlink laced with extra static. *“I can still fly. Fragging lightning got me on the wing though, my port guns are fried.”*

*“Shrapnel,”* Starscream snarled. *“I’ll kill him! Where’d he go? Where- where did that little shockroach go? Somebody with optics on give me a mark now!”*

Nobody else had optics on him, and they were all saying so when another bolt of magnified lightning whited out the world again. Soundwave staggered under the torrent of damage signals registering under his visor, and before he could recover something heavy barrelled into him, knocking him over.

He heard Jazz shout with alarm, reached out for him and found nothing. At last his optics rebooted, and the first thing they found was Shrapnel himself, in his ghastly alt-mode, two legs pinning Jazz into the mud beneath him while the other four explored the curves of his armor.

“Autobot-bot-bot?” he whistled, surprised and confused by the identity of his prey, but now that he had him, he didn’t seem interested in letting Jazz go. He clutched at Jazz with some of his legs and launched back off the ground with the others, or tried to, but Jazz was kicking and beating his fists against tender joints, and he couldn’t get the momentum he needed. He stumbled and crashed back down on the ground again, Jazz clawing for a handhold in the earth, delaying Shrapnel exactly long enough that Soundwave could adjust his angle and shoot him right in the flank. It didn’t drop him but it was enough to knock him off Jazz and back into the obscurity of night, with only his furious screeches to prove he still lived.

*“Starscream,”* Soundwave transmitted, *“Shrapnel located -”*

“Watch it- incoming!” Jazz shouted, right before what felt like a crate of bricks hit Soundwave from above and drove him right back down into the mud. He’d barely registered Kickback’s maniacal grin before the weight on him shifted, pushing him painfully deeper into the ground, and the Insecticon launched himself right back into his trademark sky-high leap. He activated the comlink to give warning, but it was too late, already he could hear the seekers swearing as he popped right up from beneath them. And then suddenly Soundwave realized he had more problems than just trying to feed intel to seekers - Kickback’s landing site wasn’t random and his departure wasn’t mercy.

He’d barely gone before a deluge of his drones poured over Soundwave while he was half pressed into the mud, crawling across his limbs and keeping him pinned to the ground, scraping at his armor with their needle-like pointed legs and even sharper denta. His sonic shoulder rifle already useless at this range, he fought to get into his subspace for the blaster gun, only for it to get knocked from his grasp the second he pulled it clear.

More weight was piling on, he could feel the pressure getting worse, and knew he would not be able to push them off on his own. So many damage reports from bites were scrolling through his CPU that he couldn’t keep his thoughts from fragmenting, couldn’t force his processor to form a plan let alone act on it -

The weight shifted and lightened. Drones shrieked as they were picked off, exactly one shot for each drone, including the one right on top of his own neck joint. Soundwave lifted his head in time to see Jazz shoot the last two still gnawing at his leg armor, nailing each of them in the head with perfect accuracy. Their shoddily built craniums popped open with circuitry and power fluids, they fell dead into the mud, and still Jazz didn’t move, arms locked and clutching at Soundwave’s blaster gun in white-opticked horror.

Jazz shot them. *Jazz perfectly aimed and shot at the Insecticon drones, even though the Autobot*

slaves had all had their targeting software disabled, even though Hook had *specifically* told Soundwave that Jazz's targeting software was *absolutely definitely disabled*. And now Jazz was still standing there watching him, the gun still raised and pointed at Soundwave. A shot from something that small wouldn't kill him, but a well-aimed one could drop him and leave the drones to finish him off... and Jazz would vanish into the jungle, gone for hours before anyone ever even noticed.

"Jazz," he said quietly. "Drop weapon."

He didn't. If anything, his hands curled a little more tightly around the hilt of the gun, but otherwise he made no move or sound. He didn't taunt or tease Soundwave, flash that wicked smile, or anything. Carefully, slowly, Soundwave picked himself up from the ground, waiting for a reaction that did not come. He took a step forward, and repeated himself. "Jazz, drop weapon."

He still didn't obey, but neither did he back up or raise the gun any further. If anything, Jazz looked confused - like he hadn't expected to be in this situation, and now didn't quite know what to do with himself. He had much to gain by pulling that trigger and running, but he didn't. And if he didn't know what to do, then Soundwave help him.

Another step closer. "Jazz," he ordered, more firmly, "give weapon." He extended his right hand for it, as naturally as if for a cube of energon, showing no fear. Every line in his posture, every syllable of his calm monotone displayed perfect confidence and the presumption that he would be obeyed, reminding Jazz of his mastery. Reminding him that he was owner, that Jazz was his, and there was no choice here but obedience. With another step he was now close enough that he could simply snatch the gun, but Soundwave held back from that. Instead he just waited, hand outstretched, calm and untouched by the raging battle around them. He watched, and waited.

Jazz seemed lost in that stare. Gaze locked helplessly on Soundwave's, after what seemed forever but in fact clocked in at just 5.6 nanokliks, he uncurled his grip and let the blaster fall into Soundwave's palm. The action triggered a shudder in his vents and the flicker of his visor coming back to life, as if waking up from a trance and relieved to find himself doing so. Cautiously, so as not to startle, Soundwave lifted a hand to the edge of Jazz's face.

"Jazz, done well. Now -"

"*So it's true!*" hissed Bombshell, crouched among the wreckage of the factory, optics thin crimson slits in the night. Promptly Soundwave pinged Starscream and fired twice with the gun in his hand, but the Insecticon was quick to dart behind cover. "Megatron and Autobots, working together against us! Filthy, lying trai-"

He shrieked again when Soundwave fired his sonic cannon, obliterating the rubble wall and sending him flying onto his back. In the next second Starscream and Thundercracker were diving from above, raking the ground with laserfire. He took flight, still screaming obscenities, the seekers in hot pursuit. Soundwave turned back, half expecting Jazz to have vanished again, but for once Jazz had stayed right beside him, obediently close, not going anywhere at all.

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Through a combination of Starscream's tactics, superior combat skills, and no small dose of sheer determination, the seekers finally managed to cut the three Insecticons apart from their drone swarms.



Relentlessly they hounded them away from the refinery site and out over the jungle, which left Soundwave and Hook to hold the line and keep the now-thinned horde from rejoining their masters. It wasn't glamorous work, but it was the only way they were ever going to win this battle.

*"Whatever you do," Starscream had ordered, and even he was starting to show ragged edges of exhaustion in both flight and voice, "keep that pack off our afterburners!"*

Soundwave's energy was dropping too. He'd shot so many drones by now that his internal reserves had been nearly sapped, and soon he'd have to refuel just to keep from falling over in stasis lock right there on the battlefield. If it was true for him then it was true for his small casseticons too, and one after the other he commanded Rumble and Ravage to return to his side for cover so they could gulp down a cube.

At least he didn't have to corral Jazz too. There was no more arguing to help, no more sneaking away or brashly going up against drones without proper weapon or backup. Instead his slave just kept behind him as ordered, quietly and without fuss. He was looking - for lack of a better word - dazed, like he'd been knocked on the head one too many times and now was having trouble keeping focus.

It was a concern for later, and right now Soundwave had his full attention on the enemy. He'd just lined up a promising cluster of them in his sights when his link to Laserbeak vibrated, at first with curiosity and then surprise. Then something else - white hot anger radiated into his consciousness, all the more shocking for her usual mild temper. He was just preparing to send an inquisitive ping for the reason when Laserbeak vanished from his reach altogether. Without even a hint of alarm for her own safety, her end of the link shut down so fast that it could have only happened by force.

Protocols surged forward in reaction, but his sonic rifle was aimed at irrelevant targets and so promptly glitched. Hydraulics seized, and he stumbled and dropped to his knees.

"Hey, what the -" started Hook, but was immediately distracted by his own attackers and turned his guns back out on the enemy. It was Ravage that bounded forward and tore into the drones that had nearly closed in on Soundwave, Ravage who had felt it all just as much as he did and was every bit as shocked, but his loyalty to Soundwave was enough to keep his own protocols in line. Distantly Soundwave heard Rumble cry out in pain too, even as he kept pounding at the earth with his piledrivers, unable to turn his back on the drones for even a nano.

"Soundwave?" So it was Jazz that hurried to kneel and face him, cupping both hands around his face. It was his first time to speak in hours. "Soundwave! What happened - what's wrong?"

"Laserbeak," he choked, "down. Gone." Sight and the rest of his external senses dimmed as he routed all energy to the symbiotic link, desperately searching for something, even if it was just the hum of her sleeping subconscious. There was nothing there to be found, nothing but a horrible emptiness.

"Is she... dead?" Jazz asked, his voice very small and afraid.

"No." Soundwave hesitated after starting to shake his head, then resolutely carried through with the motion. He didn't know, technically he *couldn't* know, but whatever the death of a symbiote must feel like, that worst nightmare for any model like his, it couldn't just be this. It couldn't be a simple snapping of the link, and then deafness - it had to be pure agony, torture, a part of himself dying.

This couldn't be the end of her, Soundwave would not let himself believe it. "But offline. Status unknown."

Belatedly he noticed the twin blooms of panic in his other two symbiotes, and automatically set to

work sending pulses of comfort to Ravage and Rumble. He didn't even realize he was leaning on Jazz until his slave moved, trying to guide him into standing again. "Well let's not waste time - which way? We have to go get her!"

Yes, demanded his instincts, but then he heard a yowl of pain from Ravage when one of the drones got a good grip, taking full advantage of his symbiote's lagging speed. He rebooted his rifle and shot off the attacker, then three more trying to crawl over Hook.

"Negative," he forced out of his vocalizer, though it killed him to do so. "Soundwave, must keep to commanded task."

"Say what?" Jazz cried, but got brushed aside out of the path of his next sonic blast. It was not mindless loyalty - after hundreds of vorns in service to the Decepticons Soundwave had learned the price of subordinating battle orders to beneath carrier protocols. It wasn't always the right choice to abandon his post and go rushing after his symbiotes; there were times it had actually put them in greater danger. The four of them were barely hanging on as it was, and could not afford for Soundwave to run away now. If the drones got back to their masters before the seekers could finish the Insecticons, they might all be dead before dawn.

Frustration and panic channeled itself into a flash of rage, and Soundwave lunged for the nearest pack of drones, tearing through them with his fists. He pounded, crushed, and crunched their bodies under his own hands, smashing them against one another or simply against the earth itself, ripping off limbs and heads when he had time or simply crumpling them when he did not. He killed every drone he could reach and when he'd run out, he turned and found the others staring with somewhat paled optics.

"Problem present?" he asked, voice a little hard, and everyone shook their heads.

"No boss," Rumble added. "But - she's gonna be okay. She's gotta be. And you gotta be able to find her when this is over, so pace yourself. Kay?" Ravage, through a mouthful of dying drone, growled agreement.

Hook simply asked, "Where's Jazz?"

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*The battle was over, the broken wreckage of buildings and bodies still smoking and hot to touch. Carefully Soundwave picked his way through it, levering up large chunks to peer beneath. This new militia, the Autobots, often wasted time and resources evacuating civilians from a sector before initiating any conflict, but no amount of evacuation orders would chase away a properly curious casseticon. And Soundwave knew he'd seen a pair of them, still trying to flit overhead from one redoubt to another, at least until the red one took a shot and went straight down to the surface... somewhere right around here. Or at least so he thought.*

*Much longer, and his commanding officer was going to notice his absence. Soundwave scaled another makeshift barricade, and was finally rewarded with a clear view of the downed casseticon - at least until a shrieking, furious blur of gold rushed at his face and he nearly fell straight back off the edge in surprise. This one was injured too, but still mobile enough to put up guard. Unmindful of Soundwave's massive size, or his own dangerously bent wing, he circled back over the identically*

*built red one and screeched warnings to stay back.*

*Another set of twins! Rather than be deterred by the tiny martinet, Soundwave's spark warmed at the sight of such devotion and he was immediately determined to have them both. That he was not his own mech anymore, and in fact may not be allowed to return to his unit with two more mecha in his possession, did not even enter his head. Carrier protocols in full control, he approached the pair again with confident and sure steps, palms turned upward in gentle supplication. The gold one flew at him again but this time he was prepared, and caught him swiftly with one hand around the beak and another on his uninjured wing. The cassetticon didn't like this at all and squalled his furious - if somewhat muffled - disapproval, while Soundwave knelt to get a better look at the red one.*

*It was in a bad way, that much was obvious. The wing had caught someone's full blaster shot and was practically gone, just a few wing platelets clinging pathetically to the splintered frame struts meant to hold them together. No amount of self-repair was going to heal this. Without surgery and reconstruction, the cassetticon would surely die. It would cost their medic resources, which meant it was going to cost him favors, but Soundwave was already pulling up memory files, calculating tips and secrets that could be offered. It would be worth it. Too many of their race was dying all around them already, all the time. Soundwave would not let this one join them.*

The battle was over. After what seemed like ages of hearing the seekers shouting orders at one another, their artillery finally took its toll. One by one the Insecticons fell, without ceremony or surrender. The worn-out and fed-up Starscream made good on his promise, and didn't allow even one to survive. From the sound of things through the comlink, he delivered Bombshell's execution blow himself.

At nearly the same time, in its usual contrary way, the rain dwindled to a stop and left them all in peace. The clouds thinned and dissipated like so much smoke after a battle, vanishing from the sky that was now paling in the east. Soundwave was already well under the trees by that time, following the signal on Jazz's collar. Hook had muttered things about having to deal with escaping slaves on top of their other problems, but Soundwave knew better. The signal had stopped moving some time ago.

Whole parts of the jungle had suffered as much battle damage as the refinery plant, and he had to pull aside huge chunks of still-smoldering foliage. He scrambled up and over a pile of fallen trees, and there, just like all those vorns ago, lay the battered and broken Laserbeak. And just like all those vorns ago, she was not alone. Jazz, now dropped offline from sheer exhaustion, lay curled around her, protecting her, waiting for Soundwave to find them.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on the aftermath

“She’ll live,” was Hook’s first and very cursory assessment, upon inspecting the unconscious Laserbeak in Soundwave’s arms. Soundwave had already thought so, but to hear the medic say it so confidently was a comfort anyway, and he felt his own rush of relief mingle with Rumble and Ravage by his pedes. “She got a bad blow to the cranium - knocked her offline, bent some of her struts out of shape. She wouldn’t be able to fly even if she were awake. What did you say happened to her?”

He directed this question to Jazz, hanging back from the group as far as he could while still keeping Laserbeak in his sightline. Jazz shrugged, arms hugging close to his chest. “I don’t know what happened. I found her like that, under the trees.”

“Well it’s not the work of a drone - no denta marks.” Fingertips swiveled and transformed into various tools as he picked over Laserbeak’s frame, from pen light to scalpel to probe. A pair of forceps slid delicately under a buckled sheet of plating, and came back out with a chunk of wet bark gripped in their blades. “Without much else to go on, I’d say your little ace flier here was victim to the mad attack of a falling tree.”

“A tree?” Rumble scoffed, and Ravage bristled slightly in agreement. “You think Laserbeak would ever be slow enough to get squashed by a stupid Earth tree?”

“I *think* I have other injuries to see to,” Hook retorted flatly, “and that you’re lucky she’s still alive. If a drone had come along after, she’d have made for a very easy snack.”

Didn’t they all know it. Again Soundwave glanced at Jazz, who was trying very hard to avoid optical contact, and thought about how he’d woken straight into a desperate hail of punches and kicks when Soundwave had touched his shoulder. When his cognitive protocols woke up enough to realize it was Soundwave and not an Insecticon over him, he’d collapsed into his arms with a weary sob. The stress of finding her, and then guarding her for the rest of the night without any weapon, had taken its toll. Soundwave carried Laserbeak back to the refinery and Jazz stumbled along behind him in total silence.

“There’s nothing more I can do for her here,” Hook was saying, unplugging his datapad from Laserbeak’s dataport. “I’ve shut off her sensors, and blocked her central processor from rebooting on its own - I don’t want her to wake up and jostle any broken struts before I’ve had a chance to operate. Everything else will have to wait until we’re back in my medbay.”

“That long?” Rumble fretted, but Soundwave just nodded. “Understood. Expectation is for surgery at earliest possibility following return to Cybertron.”

“Yessir, we’ll - I’m *coming!*” he shouted in exasperation over his shoulder, no doubt to Starscream’s querulous comms to come and see to Skywarp. “Carry her as carefully as you can, preferably in a container if you can rig one up. Broken struts can cause even more damage to internals than the injury that broke them. And don’t go skipping around too much yourself, you still have a GSW on your back that needs patching, don’t think I didn’t see. I’ll be back for you when I’m through with the seekers- damn it, if it hurts so much then *stop moving!*” He marched wrathfully back to where Skywarp lay whining in the mud, and Soundwave turned his attention to finding a clean flat surface upon which to set Laserbeak. Nervously Rumble and Ravage hovered around her still frame, no doubt struggling to overcome centuries of symbiotic programming. Coding demanded they curl up

around her, seeking comfort through touch while simultaneously barricading her against the rest of the world, but Hook's warning against bumping any broken struts kept them at bay. It was frustrating them, and Soundwave knew it.

"She's really gonna be okay?" Rumble asked anxiously, pulling his hand back from her wings for the hundredth time.

"So medic stated."

"Gah, a stupid tree. A fragging, useless stick growing out of the ground - of all the worst luck. And if any drones really had come by -"

"Jazz, guarding her," Soundwave reminded him. He hoped it would ease some of Rumble's frustration, knowing how Jazz threw himself into protecting her as diligently as Rumble ever would have, but to his surprise he caught a wisp of some strange unease at the mention of Jazz's name.

Rumble's optics flickered and he glanced back at Jazz, who'd now backed well away and was slumped to the ground in exhaustion, head buried in his arms.

"Hey, boss -"

"Well Soundwave?" Starscream interrupted, suddenly present and standing just a little too close to Laserbeak for Soundwave's taste. He leaned over and peered at her, in a way that was more scientifically curious than sympathetic. "What's the news? Will your little pet survive?"

All hackles raised at least a little at the sight of an outsider coming so close to their helpless sibling, Ravage's more than just a little. Fangs bared, a low growl reverberated in his throat, and next to him Rumble crossed his arms with a glower.

"Yeah, she will, and that's no thanks to you. We told you she shouldn't fly back out in the jungle alone. We said it was too dangerous!"

"Rumble," Soundwave warned quietly. Unfazed, Starscream favored Rumble with a particularly patronizing smirk.

"A field commander has to put his troops where he needs them, little one. It's all part of the burden of leadership - you'll probably never understand. In any case, I'm not sure anyone on the reconnaissance team is in a position to be complaining about undue danger... seeing as how it was your flawed scouting that allowed the Insecticons to pull off such a spectacular ambush in the first place."

Ravage's growl went up a notch in volume, and the fangs bared themselves more prominently.

Rumble opened his mouth to explain to Starscream how exactly they felt about that comment, but Soundwave cut him off with a silent and not-to-be-argued-with order for dismissal. They didn't want to go, didn't want to leave Laserbeak or him, but one look at him and both knew better than to argue. Unhappily they stomped away.

"Starscream knows surroundings explored to best of ability," Soundwave said coldly. "Antagonism, unnecessary."

"So was this battle. Eleven Decepticons versus three Insecticons should have been a cakewalk, and it wasn't. It was hard, and brutal, and nearly fatal for more than one of us."

Somewhere off to their left, Skywarp let out an anguished yell. "Done!" said Hook brightly. Starscream looked back and then away with a huff.

“And that’s before we even get to the reasons we had to come at all. Why were the Insecticons allowed so much free reign on Earth - against my advice? Why overlook their first attack all those megacycles ago? Why didn’t anyone analyze the damage and realize they’d stolen materials for drone construction? The mistakes have been cascading from one another, multiplying themselves, leading us into last night’s disaster, even you have to admit it.”

“Megatron’s decisions, his to make.”

“The burden of leadership,” Starscream repeated thoughtfully. “It has a price. How lucky for him that we were available to clean up his mess. That’s why I’m bringing three heads home as trophies. They should work well enough.”

“For?”

“Reminders.” Starscream’s voice turned unexpectedly hard, but when Soundwave lifted his head a fraction he simply smiled and turned away, drifting back to his seekers, pretending he couldn’t feel Soundwave’s stare pressing into the back of his head. He was distracted from this by a glimmer of attention from Rumble, as if about to comm him, but then Hook was clumping his way back over to Soundwave and the message never came. He looked over at Rumble, who just looked away.

“On the ground, sir, and hold still. I need to patch that leak before you lose every last ounce of lubricating fluid all over this dump.”

Soundwave obeyed in silence, settling himself alongside his unconscious casseticon. At the medic’s command he switched the sensors back on, and braced himself. Hook was not known for gentle treatment, and sure enough, the raw wound on his back flamed up in protest when a probe went digging into it for debris.

“So we got ambushed,” Hook said matter-of-factly, with his usual lack of preamble. “And that’s embarrassing. Who knew they’d be underground? Your scouts never found any digging in the jungle, or even inside the refinery, from what they say. But the more I think about it, tunneling through the floors of the buildings was the best way to cover those bugs’ tracks. All it would take is someone to repave the concrete. Any of my team could have done it... just so long as they could get away somehow. But then, that kind of planning isn’t exactly what the Insecticons are known for.”

“Conducted further investigation on site?” Soundwave asked.

“I looked, but there’s not much left to investigate. We can thank our friends the seekers for that.” Soundwave sensed the movement of his struts as he shrugged, and a small puff of frustration from his vents. “There’s something else bothering me too.”

The sun edged itself up over the trees, and suddenly the clearing was bathed in the slanting gold light of dawn. Soundwave watched Ravage slink alongside the rubble and stop in front of Jazz, still slumped into a weary huddle on the ground. Warily he looked at Ravage, and in total silence Ravage looked right back.

“Elaborate.”

“I was tussling with Shrapnel, that creepy little bastard, and do you know what he called me? ‘Dirty traitor’. Odd thing to say, I thought, coming from the ones that were doing all the betraying.”

Odd indeed. Soundwave recalled that Bombshell had shouted something similar at him. Was it because of Jazz? They had been surprised to find an Autobot on the battlefield; maybe they assumed Decepticons and Autobots were joining forces against them. That made some sense, but Soundwave

didn't quite believe that was all of it.

"Wish I could ask him what he meant," Hook was saying, voicing Soundwave's own thoughts.

"But that can't happen now. We can thank the seekers for that too."

Against the glow of the rising sun, Ravage dipped his head and bumped it gently against Jazz's arm. Jazz's lips curved up into a small, wan smile. Very, very slowly, his hand moved, fingertips finding their way to the vulnerable crease just behind Ravage's audio receptors, and began to scratch.

"There, finished." With a final smack Hook slapped the magnetic mesh in its place, an action that sent painful throbs rippling through Soundwave's dermal plating.

"Hook, discussed this with field commander?"

"Not yet," muttered the Constructicon, with a tone to his voice that sounded more like 'not ever'.

"Maybe it's not that important. All I can say is that something just doesn't feel right."

"These observations noted," Soundwave assured him. "Provide further details if more remembered."

He had a feeling that Hook was exactly right, and wished he knew why.

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The sun rose, and with it the heat, evaporating the fallen rain around them into a sticky, uncomfortable mugginess that clung to the insides of one's armor. Starscream had to allow the seekers a chance to rest before attempting any transocean flights, so they were all stuck there for the time being. When he had the chance, Soundwave at last beckoned Rumble closer.

"Rumble, requires attention? Detecting frequent attempts to communicate."

"Yeah well. I'm starting to think it was nothing after all."

"Soundwave will make this determination. Speak."

"Yeah okay," he mumbled diffidently. "So - I mean - that is... last night, in the battle, did Jazz do anything funny? I mean, not like the way he's always funny, but... funny weird?"

Instantly Soundwave's memory flashed back to the pounding rain, artillery raging all around them, Jazz standing there with his own gun pointed straight at his chest. He twisted and tightened his end of the link before Rumble could sense the rise in emotion.

"Reason for query?" he simply asked, voice and posture neutral. Rumble shuffled and hesitated, and without much effort Soundwave could sense his feelings all too clearly - doubt, confusion, and worry.

"I'm not so sure anymore. The lightning made things so hard to see, and those fragging drones were just everywhere. I didn't have time to speak up and tell you - it was all I could do to stay alive."

"Specify: tell what?"

"I - under the trees, for just a nano - I thought I saw..." Rumble dropped his voice to near inaudible

levels. "Sideswipe."

*Sideswipe.* The missing Autobot, the vicious and violent Autobot, the lone free Autobot left on Earth and last presumed to be hiding from the empire in central Asia - here? Now? Ruthlessly Soundwave kept screwing a tighter lid over his end of the link, refusing to let the shock bleed back out to Rumble.

"Show recording now," he said calmly, much more calmly than he felt. But Rumble just shrugged helplessly.

"I wasn't taping. I had about six drones trying to eat me at the time, and the lightning flashed just when I was looking, and I saw the red armor, and then it was dark again and he was gone."

"Rumble knows this may have only been other drone."

"Yeah, boss."

"Presence of this Autobot, extremely unlikely."

"I know, boss. To show up here, right under the nosecones of both lead trines, is really just asking to get caught and hauled back to Cybertron. And that's only if the Insecticons didn't chew him up first. But he might risk it - if he figured out Jazz was here. Soundwave, what if he came for Jazz?"

Soundwave's gaze flew back over to where Jazz had been resting, and nearly panicked when he saw nothing but rubble and mud. Jazz had gotten to his pedes again for some reason, and was aimlessly wandering away from the buildings - closer to the jungle. The shadows under the trees had become all the darker in contrast to the bright sunshine, deep and black enough to hide practically anything.

"I guess not, though," Rumble was saying. "Cuz the battle's over and Jazz is still here, so -"

"Jazz!" Soundwave so rarely raised his voice that everyone in the clearing looked up, startled, but Soundwave took no notice as he surged to standing and crossed the distance between them in long, brisk strides. Jazz had flinched too, perhaps out of guilty reflex, and took a few nervous steps back as Soundwave closed in.

"Stop," he snapped. "Right now, stop moving."

"I was just- hey!" Jazz squawked when Soundwave grabbed his wrist and yanked him closer, just when he had nearly reached the trees. Promptly he clapped Jazz's chains back on, but even when that deed was done he kept a steel grip latched onto at least one of Jazz's arms.

"That hurts."

"Reason for departing camp?"

"I wasn't going anywhere - I was just looking for something to carry Laserbeak in. Soundwave, please stop squeezing my arm so hard, it *hurts*."

Soundwave relaxed his grip slightly, but only just, still mindful of their proximity to the jungle.

"Come, your presence now required. Mental interrogation to be conducted."

"What? Why?" Jazz's visor flashed white with alarm and he resisted when Soundwave tugged him forward. "Is this about last night? Because I can explain -"

"Yes, Jazz will explain. But interrogation to be held regardless." Purposefully he towed Jazz to the south side of the nearest semi-intact warehouse, all too aware of the curiosity in the seekers' gazes.



To Rumble he dispatched a quick order to continue conversing with the others, keeping a casual appearance; Ravage he ordered to stand guard. Jazz was still trying to squirm out of his grasp when Soundwave rounded the wall and settled himself on the ground.

“Soundwave, why are we doing this? You know that it’s pointless, you know you won’t understand any of it!”

“That, my concern. Jazz will be still and submit, or lie on ground underneath Soundwave.”

Jazz scowled and looked away, but the offered choice had the effect of cutting his struggles short. Defeated, he knelt by Soundwave’s legs and stopped trying to pull his hand free. “Fine. If this what you want, help yourself. Enjoy the guns and roses - it’s how I get in the mood.”

Soundwave ignored the nonsensical comment, checked to make sure Ravage was prowling a satisfactory perimeter around them, and tipped his head back against the wall behind them. Optics shuttered, audios muted, he began.

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE! WE’VE GOT FUN AND GAMES! WE’VE GOT EVERYTHING YOU WANT, HONEY, WE KNOW THE NAMES! WE ARE THE PEOPLE THAT CAN FIND WHATEVER YOU MAY NEED. IF YOU GOT THE MONEY, HONEY, WE GOT YOUR DISEASE!

The music slammed into him with as much force as the memory itself, rain plummeting from the skies above and driving against his - Jazz’s - armor. Through Jazz’s optics he saw the attack play itself out all over again, the swarms of drones bursting up from below and clambering over him.

Senseless human words battered against Soundwave, song words he knew he would never understand. He wasn’t going to try. Instead he violated his own long-standing rule and tapped deeper, down through Jazz’s thoughts and into the emotions, ready to risk it if it would only give him answers. What would he feel, through Jazz, if he knew another Autobot had come to rescue him? Anxiety? Expectancy? Hope?

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE, IT GETS WORSE HERE EVERYDAY! YOU LEARN TO LIVE LIKE AN ANIMAL IN THE JUNGLE WHERE WE PLAY. IF YOU GOT A HUNGER FOR WHAT YOU SEE, YOU’LL TAKE IT EVENTUALLY. YOU CAN HAVE ANYTHING YOU WANT BUT YOU BETTER NOT TAKE IT FROM ME. IN THE JUNGLE, WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE! WATCH IT BRING YOU TO YOUR KNEES - I WANNA WATCH YOU BLEED!

Instead it was terror and exhilaration that flowed through Jazz as he whirled and leapt and sprinted for his life. Fear of the enemy, yes, a healthy fear that kept him moving faster than the drones could catch him, but it came mixed with a heady thrill for the combat. For the first time in years, he was more soldier than slave, not just allowed but even encouraged to fight back. He was so close to dying, but had never felt more alive. The taste was intoxicating and Soundwave drank it in, sinking deeper by the second and too caught up in the rush to care.

THUNDERSTRUCK! THUNDERSTRUCK! IT’S ALRIGHT, WE’RE DOIN’ FINE!

THUNDERSTRUCK, YEAH! The giddy delight only multiplied when he joined forces with Soundwave, working together to outwit, outrace, and outshoot the Insecticons’ drones. Pride flourished, and satisfaction, overwhelming happiness to have helped his master beat back the enemy, to be treated - however briefly - as an equal on the battlefield. YOU’VE BEEN THUNDERSTRUCK!

Then the dropped blaster gun skittered and bounced its way into Jazz's hands, where it shot every drone off Soundwave without hesitation. And that's when all the music just dried up, sucked away as if into the vacuum of space where there is only silence. It startled Soundwave back into his own consciousness, even as he stared out through Jazz's optics down the barrel of a gun pointed at Soundwave's chest, knowing full well what he'd just given away but not at all what to do next.

No music. Silence. For the first time that Soundwave had ever come into this mind Jazz had no music to give voice to his thoughts. There were no thoughts to give voice *to*. He simply froze, stuck, watching Soundwave approach and unable to do a thing about it or even wonder whether he should. When Soundwave held his hand out for the gun, Jazz didn't so much decide to surrender it as the hand opened on its own accord and gave it up.

The void lingered, even as Soundwave watched himself do battle against the Insecticons under Jazz's unblinking gaze. Freewheeling confusion was the only emotion to be found, still without conscious thought, and even Soundwave was disturbed enough to wish for any silly human song to come back and bring sound to this mind again.

OH A STORM IS THREATENING MY VERY LIFE TODAY. IF I DON'T GET SOME SHELTER, OH YEAH, I'M GONNA FADE AWAY. WAR, CHILDREN, IT'S JUST A SHOT AWAY. IT'S JUST A SHOT AWAY!

For whatever reason, the news that Laserbeak had gone down was what it took to shake Jazz out of his stupor. He plunged into the darkness under the trees, clawing wet branches out of his way, staggering with uncharacteristic clumsiness toward the sounds of the seekers' fight. OOH, SEE THE FIRE IS SWEEPING OUR VERY STREET TODAY. BURNS LIKE A RED COAL CARPET, A MAD BULL LOST ITS WAY. THE FLOOD IS THREATENING MY VERY LIFE TODAY. GIMME, GIMME SHELTER OR I'M GONNA FADE AWAY!

Fear bloomed and swallowed the confusion, but with only the song to go by Soundwave had no way of knowing why Jazz was afraid - fear for Laserbeak, fear of the enemy, fear of Soundwave? The song circled relentlessly in his mind while Jazz stumbled through the darkness, until he at last found Laserbeak lying unconscious on the forest floor. He dropped to his knees, unmistakable relief overwhelming everything else in just that moment. And then helplessly, unwillingly, recognizing some spark of something else deep within -

I TELL YOU, LOVE, SISTER. IT'S JUST A KISS AWAY!

Soundwave snapped back into his own body so fast it hurt, and was immediately assailed by a menacing *urgent urgent urgent* alert through the symbiotic link. Ravage was the cause, armor bristling and fangs bared, a low and steady growl rumbling around in his throat. It was threat enough to keep Starscream hovering just outside his guard, but not enough to make him turn around and leave, and when he saw light return to Soundwave's visor he exhaled a small huff of impatience.

"Finally. I just came to ask if you'd picked up on any residual frequencies from the drones. I wanted to make sure we didn't leave behind any survivors... but I see you've been busy with other things."

His stare traveled down to Jazz, who had tipped forward against Soundwave's chest at some point, vents cycling hard. Wan light flickered on in his visor, fixed first on Soundwave's own optics. For the briefest of seconds Soundwave saw the desperate terror in there, but Starscream was still watching and Jazz was nothing if not quick to put on a show. Fluidly he rolled back to one side, nestling himself against Soundwave's frame as he faced Starscream.

“Jealous, Starscream?” he purred. “Did you want to go first?”

Curiosity morphed into revulsion, and Starscream pulled his lips back in a grimace. “Do you actually *enjoy* that?”

“What, you don’t?”

“Ew.” Starscream whirled around and stomped away, and Soundwave could feel Jazz exhale with relief. “Not every day you get a chance to outkink a seeker. Thank you for that, at least.” He moved again, this time to push himself up and off Soundwave, looking just a trace unsteady as he sat upright. The fear had vanished now, covered up with his usual cool reserve. “So did you find what you were looking for?”

A good question. Soundwave had to pause and remember just what that was: a glimpse of Sideswipe, maybe, or of some hope to find him and leave Soundwave forever - but there was nothing. Many interesting things, actually, but not that. Rumble had to have been mistaken after all.

“Perhaps,” he answered cautiously. “But promised explanation, still expected. During battle, Jazz took possession of short-range blaster gun and disposed of enemy drones attacking me. How?”

“That’s the funniest way of saying thank you I ever heard.”

“Jazz will answer the question. Ability to aim for drones, accomplished how?”

“Who says I did?” Jazz tried to flash that old sassy grin, unconvincing though it was. “Maybe I was aiming for you.”

“Jazz. Honest answer, now.”

His shoulders dropped, and Soundwave saw the way his hands curled against the earth underneath them. “Fine, I’ll tell you. But please *please* promise you won’t get angry.”

Soundwave would do no such thing, and simply looked at him expectantly. “Hook’s surgery disabled the connection between optical relay and my targeting program,” Jazz finally said, reluctantly. “But the truth is, I never used that connection. My targeting protocols tap into my audial relays - I aim by hearing, not seeing. Always have.”

That was all, such a simple explanation, but a cold tremor ran through Soundwave as he considered the implications. All this time... so much time had passed since the end of the war. And Jazz had spent it living among the seekers, sleeping in their rooms. If any of them had left just one gun lying about -

“Soundwave, please don’t look at me like that,” Jazz begged. “It doesn’t matter. It never mattered. What gun would I ever get my hands on that could kill a Decepticon in one shot? There isn’t one, and I’d be a dead mech just for pulling the trigger. You know it’s true.”

Yes, supplied his logic protocols, this was true. Furthermore, he also knew that there was nothing he could do to fix it even if he wanted to. Drag Jazz to the Constructicons for a new surgery, and Megatron would hear about it within the cycle. Whatever the risks, Soundwave would have to accept this ability of Jazz’s and ensure prevention of any future incidents. But then, perhaps the risk wasn’t that great.

“Jazz, gave up weapon on command. Reason?”

Jazz flinched and looked away. “Does it matter?”

“Question asked. Answer expected.”

“It’s stupid, right?” Jazz tried another grin, but this one was shakier. “Two days ago I was begging you to let me go in the desert. Then last night I had my chance, and I didn’t take it. What does that mean? That I don’t care about freedom anymore? Or that I can’t hurt you to get it? Is there even a difference?” His hands were shaking too, Soundwave saw, and his voice by more than a little. “So I don’t know, Soundwave. How can I answer the question? How can I be honest the way you want me to be when *I don’t know*?”

“This, reason for only silence in your mind, no music?”

“I swear, it’s never happened to me before, baby, it was just the stress... long night...”

“Or perhaps, Jazz just afraid to acknowledge reason. Afraid to acknowledge truth that now Jazz loyal to Soundwave.”

“Don’t say that!” Jazz pleaded, fans spinning a little faster. “Don’t say the L-word, not to me.”

“Jazz,” Soundwave said firmly, cupping his face in both hands. “Remain calm. Remember what Soundwave told you, on night of Shockwave’s party?”

“That I’m untrustworthy, insincere, and always have an ulterior motive.”

“Also one other thing. Repeat it.”

“You said...” Jazz had to reboot his vocalizer. “You said ‘Soundwave, yours’.”

“And last night, Jazz demonstrated as much. Jazz fought to assist Soundwave in battle. Jazz sought to locate and protect Laserbeak. Jazz, saved my life. Nobody made these choices but Jazz. And Jazz, turned down chance for escape. Reason: Jazz not willing to leave behind what is his.”

“Well- well that’s a theory.”

“It is more than what Jazz can offer. And it should demonstrate well enough that your fear, pointless. How can Jazz be afraid of own decisions?”

“Shows what you know about drinking games.”

“Jazz, today permitted to scratch Ravage’s audial receptors,” Soundwave reminded him, gently.

“Jazz, thinks it possible to go back?”

Something in Jazz’s haunted gaze softened, just a little, and Soundwave knew he’d said enough. He lowered his hands, and did not move to grab Jazz’s arm again. “This discussion, concluded for now. Go, rejoin cassettes, get rest. Jazz, endured much last night.”

“Yeah,” mumbled Jazz. “And I think there was some kind of battle on, too.”

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Starscream announced that they would not be returning to the Stunticon base, but simply fly directly back to the space bridge. He told Soundwave there was nothing they needed from that place, and

that anyway the bridge was actually a closer flight if they took the Pacific route. As for his actual reasons, Soundwave wasn't sure if he was trying to avoid Skyfire, didn't want the Stunticons to see his scratched and scorched seekers, or wanted to put up a good front to Megatron by showing that his troops could return directly to Cybertron without need of the Earth base for rest and medbay facilities. Probably all three. Starscream certainly wasn't in a mood to discuss the details. He merely ordered Soundwave to contact the base and have them arrange with Cybertron the bridge reactivation. And oh yes, to send their 'taxi' whenever ready. At which point he stomped away.

Soundwave did as commanded, and also ordered Ravage to return. He'd been out scouring the jungle for Sideswipe's scent for much of the morning, and finding nothing, though he reminded Soundwave that the heavy rain made that inconclusive. Rumble had by that point long since crashed into recharge, lying fast asleep sprawled over the chest of an equally fast asleep Jazz. Soundwave let them remain that way, working on his report and a jostle-proof litter for Laserbeak. Not until Skyfire was actually visible on the horizon, wheels dropping into position, did he shake them gently awake.

His two casseticons he docked. Not just because they were no longer needed to scout the surroundings, nor even because they needed it - and they desperately did - but because Soundwave knew he would have no peace until he did. Bad enough that he couldn't tuck Laserbeak safely inside as well, and had to keep looking at her pitiful broken body, knowing every time he did just how close a call it had been. Starscream was not wrong when he said the battle was closer to fatal than it should have ever been, and the frames of his small cassettes were so fragile. Even Ravage, who would deny that statement to his last snarl, was too exhausted to argue when Soundwave opened his chest.

As for Jazz, he had his own reasons for being more tired than any of them, emotional as well as physical. He blinked groggily at Soundwave when woken, stumbled up Skyfire's ramp, then promptly sank right back into recharge with his head in Soundwave's lap without saying so much as a word to Skyfire. Soundwave might have taken that chance to recharge too (Hook did), but somehow he still couldn't bring himself to. Not here on Earth, where the unexpected seemed so much in abundance, and even the simplest of missions could turn into disaster. Not where at least one wild Autobot was lurking, whether he'd been in that jungle or not. Not while Soundwave himself was riding *in* an Autobot over the deepest and largest of Earth's oceans. After the chaos of the night, it seemed to him now that things had come to too peaceful a conclusion, that it had all ended just a little too easily. Spark thumping, he spent the entire journey in a state of quiet dread, surrounded by sleeping mecha and half expecting the worst at any moment.

But, strangely, the worst never came. Skyfire brought them directly to the bridge and landed on the desert floor without so much as a bump. The seekers were there waiting, the bridge primed and ready for opening. This time Jazz patted Skyfire's plating in farewell, when they disembarked, in a way that was perhaps just a bit more tender and intimate than Soundwave would have liked, but still said nothing. He didn't resist when Soundwave took his hand and led him into the bridge, didn't even look back. And as quickly as they'd all come here, in a blinding pillar of white light, Earth was gone.

The return to Cybertron brought the same wave of dizzy disorientation that leaving it had, but this time there was no dazzling sunlight or intense heat to overwhelm the sensors. Soundwave felt the last of Earth's warmth seep away from his plating, the air around him now cold and thin as he was used to, and knew they were home. The sudden nearness to the sparks of Buzzsaw and Frenzy, more importantly, came rushing through the symbiotic links and engulfed his stressed carrier protocols with relief. They were already on the move, coming to greet him, and he hurried to redirect them to the Constructicon medbay instead. That in turn brought a slew of questions and demands, but before Soundwave could give explanation Starscream was in front of him again.

“He knows we’re home,” Starscream announced tersely. “And he wants his debriefing. But he told me he wants to read your report first before any meeting - it’s almost as if he doesn’t trust my own account of what happened. Can you imagine?” He shrugged and smirked at nothing in particular, unbothered by Soundwave’s silence. “Have it to him in two joors; we meet in three.”

“Laserbeak, scheduled for immediate surgery.”

“Then I guess you better hope it doesn’t take three joors. But that all depends on how badly she got herself scrapped, doesn’t it? See you there.” Starscream turned wing and sailed out of the bridge dock, the other seekers trailing after.

“Bitch,” Jazz muttered, and smiled in a resigned way when Soundwave looked at him. “It’s been a long orn - I don’t have anything better. But that one word works pretty well, don’t you think?”

“Come. Cassetticons, waiting at medbay.”

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It felt like the first time in megacycles that Soundwave had his entire family in one room again.

Rumble and Frenzy were overjoyed to be reunited, and expressed their feelings by slamming one another into the floor and pounding fists into each others’ plating. Draped in the corner, Ravage watched them try to break one another with the dry bemusement of one who is used to it. By rights Buzzsaw should have been doing the same, nipping at Laserbeak’s wings and chasing her around the room, but for him there would be no such cheerful reunion. The family was almost all in one room, but not quite, not with his twin on the other side of the window being operated on as they watched. Laserbeak’s cranium was laid open to the cortex, Hook deep inside her with a scalpel, and all her brother could do was watch and trill anxiously. After a while Soundwave just scooped him up and held him in his arms, giving him the physical comfort that his twin could not.

The surgery lasted, in the end, just under three joors. Soundwave watched the medic weld together the last of the incisions, unplug his datapad, and motion him to come in. Barely had Soundwave opened the door than the entirety of his cassettes piled through, clambering over one another to be the first by her side. Hook opened his mouth to yell, realized the futility of it, and shrugged it off.

“Status?” Soundwave asked, as neutral in tone as ever.

“She’s seen better days, but it could have been a lot worse. A lot of her cognitive nodes took damage with that hit, but I’ve repaired the hardware damage and removed the blocks on her reboot sequencing. When my pain buffer wears off, she’ll be able to wake up. A word of warning: her CPU will have to reinitialize all functions - all of them. That means sensory processing, language functions, motor skills, all of it. There’s nothing I can do to fastrack the process, they have to reboot on their own. She might be awake for a while before they finish. And forget transformation or docking - she won’t be ready for that until I’ve repaired her wings. That’ll be another surgery for another day.”

Soundwave winced and felt Buzzsaw wince along with him. Cassetticons were designed for two things: to explore and then to dock with their carrier afterwards, and now she would be able to do neither. Soundwave stroked a hand down the crest of his back, trying to keep him soothed.

“Damage, can be repaired?”

“Yes, damage can be repaired. When her body is ready for it. As for now, I am tired and ready to go be with my team. And you, from what I hear, are due in headquarters to debrief Megatron. I’ll send you a message when she wakes up.”

This was true, the chronometer steadily ticking down the time, and here he was lingering in the Constructicon complex and encrusted in layers of Earth’s mud besides. He couldn’t present anything to Megatron in this state, he had to go home, rinse off, get ready. He opened his chest.

“Buzzsaw. Frenzy.”

“Already? No! I don’t want to go in right now, I haven’t even hardly heard what happened yet, don’t make us dock while you tell Megatron everything!” On the berth next to him, Buzzsaw’s plating bristled up in unhappy reaction for his own reasons. That was his twin lying there unconscious, and he wanted to stay with her. Soundwave wanted him to stay there too, but he’d been apart from these two cassettes for too long. They needed this and so did he.

“Frenzy, will hear full account of mission from Rumble soon enough. Expectation, it will be told more colorfully than military debriefing. Buzzsaw, Laserbeak offline regardless. Physical proximity will not change that. Synchronization required; your preference, to wait and dock while Laserbeak waking? Or now, while in stasis?”

The two sulked, but their own protocols were urging for this as much as Soundwave’s were, and grudgingly they submitted and transformed. “Rumble, prepare to attend debriefing. Ravage, Iacon only partially monitored for duration of mission to Earth. Begin surveillance of headquarters while command staff preoccupied in meeting, investigate for any new developments.”

“And what about me?” Jazz asked quietly. He was kneeling by the berth, stroking a gentle thumb over the curve of Laserbeak’s helm. “Can I stay with her? Please?”

“NO.”

That was Hook speaking, not Soundwave, Hook who had not even been in the room but practically threw himself into it now with optics blazing. “No, no, no! There is now officially a *No Jazz* rule in this medbay, I just haven’t had time to post the signs yet.”

“Reminder,” Soundwave spoke up. “Intervention from Jazz spared slave First Aid from savage beating at Megatron’s hands. Possibly death. Favor, owed.”

Hook twitched at that, then cast a suspicious look back at Jazz, now wearing his sweetest and most innocent of smiles. “Ugh. Fine. But you listen up slave: set one pede out this room, touch one machine... *look at* one machine, and I won’t stop at kicking you out. I’ll disassemble you with my pliers first, then kick you out one piece after another. Got me?”

“Understood,” Jazz promised quickly. “You won’t even know I’m here.”

Hook harumphed and marched out of the room again. Jazz’s vents exhaled in relief. “Thank you.”

“My preference, not to leave Laserbeak alone at this time. Stay, behave, and I will return after debriefing.” From under Soundwave’s hand, Jazz’s head nodded.

“Just don’t take too long, okay? Keep it short and simple. ‘They were underground, then they weren’t. Now they’re dead. The end.’”

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“So let me get this straight,” drawled Megatron, the moment Starscream was done presenting his fairly theatrical - and lengthy - rendition of the battle. “You spent the entire day camped out directly over Bombshell and his personal army. Fell into recharge... on top of them. And the only reason you and your team weren’t eaten alive in your sleep is because the one Autobot slave in your midst was kind enough to wake you up before they could.”

He readjusted his position in his seat and smirked at the look on Starscream’s face. The response was a haughty stiffening of the wings, and Starscream’s overly polite cough.

“Ahem. As I stated earlier, it was Soundwave’s team that performed reconnaissance - or didn’t, as it turns out. Perhaps questions about that particular fiasco should be directed to him.”

Rumble was already bristling, but Soundwave warned him with a silent pulse to keep quiet, and answered calmly. “Symbiotes, searched environment as well as could be expected. No signs of digging or tunneling found in jungle. Therefore, no reasonable way to guess where Insecticons had hidden. Soundwave, prepared to take full responsibility for this oversight.”

“Then how did they get down there?”

“At this time, still unverified. Constructicon Hook hypothesized that tunneling took place within buildings, and floors subsequently repaved.”

“By who?”

“This, still subject of investigation.”

Megatron mulled that over, optics darkening thoughtfully. “Clever. For them. So, they attacked from below -”

“Attacked with *extreme* numbers,” Starscream interjected helpfully.

“- and you shot them down.”

“Please, Megatron. There was rather more art to it than that. My seekers were outnumbered a hundred to one, blinded by rain and lightning, surrounded by drones that didn’t care whether they lived or died. Yet still we carved through their swarm like hot knives through cold steel.”

Starscream’s voice dropped to a husky murmur, dancing a fingertip through the air in simulation of his seekers’ flight patterns. “We didn’t ‘shoot them down’, we annihilated them.”

Sitting on Soundwave’s console, Rumble gave a nauseated roll of the optics. Soundwave couldn’t quite blame him. Starscream had rinsed off after their return to the planet, but hadn’t bothered with a buffing and was proudly flaunting his many new battle scars. They made for both a stark contrast to the pristine Shockwave and a proven method of catching Megatron’s - still a gladiator at spark - optic. It was working, too. Soundwave watched Megatron’s optics follow Starscream’s hand, flushing deeper and darker red with every word.

“And the Insecticons themselves? I didn’t quite catch how you forced them into the battle.”

“I knew they must still be hiding underground, using their army to tire us out, so I delegated rousting them to the troops on the ground.” Again he tipped his head toward Soundwave.



“Drones’ return to surface had left many sizeable tunnels, presumably leading to approximate location of Insextions,” Soundwave explained. “Explosives dropped into them; this, forced Insecticons aboveground.”

“Bombs? That’s not your usual style.”

“Unusual circumstances forced alternative strategies,” Soundwave answered, carefully truthful if absent a few details. It had been impossible to leave him out altogether, but Soundwave had done his best to avoid mentioning Jazz’s name for most of the report. “This, most effective solution to fulfill Starscream’s command.”

“Leaving you to deal with both drones and Insecticons.”

“It was hard, yes,” Starscream allowed. “Much more dangerous for us. But what choice did I have? I knew it was meaningless to slap down their drones while the ringleaders bided their time, we had to confront them before our own energy levels dropped too low. Shrapnel played his dirty tricks with the storm’s lightning, but it wasn’t enough to save them. Once we had them cut off from their pathetic pets, they had no chance against us.”

“And so you killed them.” Again Megatron glanced at the three heads sitting on the holodisplay table, in all their scorched and blackened glory. “An action not included in my original order.”

“They never offered to surrender. Even when it was the three of them against the six of us, they fought to the bitter end, never stopped trying to kill us. So what else could I do but return the favor? Bombshell himself forced my hand when he tackled me straight down into the jungle, tried to strangle me. I had to transform and haul him over my shoulder joint, slam him into the earth, pin him down with my heel turbine to his neck.”

Starscream lounged against the edge of the table, tracing an idle circle around the crown of Bombshell’s lifeless head. Soundwave watched Megatron shift again, the gaps in his armor opening a little wider. Starscream knew exactly what effect he was having on Megatron, for all he pretended not to notice.

“He tried to shoot me with one of his little pit-spawned cerebro shells then, but I was faster. I put two shots in his head, then cut it off his body for good measure. I felt we’d played long enough through the night.”

“And the other two?”

“With Bombshell gone, their minutes were numbered. Thundercracker and Ramjet shot Shrapnel into a twitchy little mess, and I helped the others smash Kickback permanently into the ground.”

“And you never once,” Shockwave finally spoke up, “gleaned any kind of idea as to why they attacked the colony in the first place?”

“Combat is a rough and tumble business, Premier,” answered Starscream, as condescendingly as he possibly could and without taking his optics off Megatron. “I didn’t have much time for a committee hearing during our fight for survival. But I think it’s obvious why they did it anyway - they’ve always been a little bit insane, and never had proper respect for the Decepticon name. Leaving them alone on Earth made both problems worse. It was just a matter of time before they became a threat to us - but now, that threat is gone. Better late than never, I suppose.”

“You have always been gifted with marvelous hindsight, Starscream,” Megatron said, so generously that one could almost miss the sarcasm. “Still, what’s done is done. Whatever the reason, if they

were so determined to betray me then there really is no other appropriate response. They had to be put down. I would have made it last longer, but I'd have probably done the same."

Starscream's systems revved a little at the word *longer*, and leaned deeper over the table.

Soundwave could hear Shockwave's quiet hiss of disgust, but privately felt only relief. For all his teasing, it was apparent that Megatron wasn't really displeased with the way they'd conducted the fight. Quite the opposite, actually. Starscream was going to be upstairs and in Megatron's berth before the end of the cycle, where the last of any lingering tensions between them would be shortly pounded into oblivion.

This battle really did come along just at the right time. Starscream's value to the empire had been reaffirmed, so he was happy. Megatron had seen a threat to his colony eliminated, so he was happy.

Shockwave... was certainly not happy that Starscream's political career had just been saved in the nick of time, but since continued Insecticon attacks on Earth's production would have eventually disrupted his energon rationing, even he had to be grateful for the results of the mission. And Soundwave was happy because all of them were happy, and the government could carry on in peace.

It was exactly this moment that someone cleared and rebooted his vocalizer. Soundwave glanced at the source of the sound, by the entrance to the command platform, and got a cold shock to his spark when he saw Jazz standing there with Laserbeak cradled in his arms. When their optics met he smiled timidly.

"... hi."

Involuntarily Soundwave's optics rebooted themselves, just to check, but no, Jazz was still standing there in the *exact center* of Decepticon Headquarters, on its highest level, right in front of all of them. By his elbow he heard Rumble breathe, "What the f--"

"*What?*" choked Megatron, probably when he was done rebooting his own optics, "do you *think* you are doing here?" Two long steps brought him dangerously close and Jazz was quick to back up, up against the railing surrounding them.

"I'm sorry!" he blurted, "I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't be here. But in my defense, I was ordered to come."

"By *who?*"

"By her." Jazz held Laserbeak forward, awake from her surgery and rolling clumsily around in Jazz's arms as she tried to regain control over her motor functions. It took some blinking, but eventually her optics found Soundwave and brightened. Jazz was keeping a nervous watch on Megatron's looming presence, but now he looked sideways at Soundwave.

"I'm not going to pretend I understand, but she woke up and started shrieking at me. I told her I'd go find Hook, but she just kept getting more and more panicky..." Now it was Soundwave that closed the distance to Jazz, and he grasped his arm to yank him closer and at least a little further from Megatron. "Jazz, ordered to stay in medbay!"

"You ordered me to stay with *her*," Jazz corrected, "and she needs you. I asked if it had to be now, and she pecked once." Uneasily he looked at their staring audience: Megatron, Starscream, and Shockwave, and lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. "I think it might have to do with the mission."

“Soundwave?” Megatron said impatiently, with just an edge of should-I-kill-this-slave? in his voice.

“Apology for interruption, offered. But slave, following Laserbeak’s orders. Due to injury, symbiote in possession of unreported surveillance.”

The anger faded from Megatron’s face, and in its place curiosity perked up. “You mean she has something to add to the debriefing?”

“Likely, yes,” Soundwave answered cautiously, wishing very much that he knew what that something was. But Megatron either didn’t notice or didn’t care to notice his reluctance, and gestured imperiously to the both of them.

“Then let’s have it.”

With the order given, Soundwave had no choice. He bowed his head in acceptance, then returned his attention to Laserbeak, dropping to one knee to face her directly. How frustrating it was, to see her and even touch her, yet hear nothing through their link. Sensations like urgency and anxiety fluttered at her end, like whispers of a voice far away and too fleeting to understand. It was like being deaf. Helplessly he brushed a thumb across the crest of her head, wondering why she just couldn’t have waited. But under his touch she squirmed and struggled, snapping her beak, and he knew it really must be important. She wouldn’t have pushed to get this far otherwise.

“I think,” Jazz whispered, “she’s trying to tell us that Timmy’s at the bottom of a well.”

“Jazz.”

“Yes boss?”

“Do not speak up here.”

“Yes boss.”

As long as Laserbeak’s struts were still broken, transformation and docking was not possible. But her dataports still functioned, and now that she was conscious she could upload at least a visual copy of her recordings into his console. It would lack the full nuance of a proper recording processed by his carrier programming, but it would do for now. With extreme care he levered her out of Jazz’s arms and settled her on his console, plugged in a cable and started work to route her files into his monitor. Images of Earth sprang onto the screen, messy and shaky from Laserbeak’s viewpoint as she tried to fly in a decidedly un-flightfriendly environment under the jungle canopy. Rain pelted across her vision, obscuring it, and the repeated flashes of lightning scarred her sensitive optics even worse than it ever did for Soundwave. Scenes scrambled into static and disappeared, flipping forward as Laserbeak tried to sync her recordings to the console.

Soundwave heard the creak of Megatron shifting his weight, beginning to look a bit impatient, and Rumble looked nervously from him to Soundwave. He was just about to suggest a break for the others while he dealt with this when Laserbeak squawked triumphantly. Directly ahead of Laserbeak, a swathe of trees splintered when two mecha smashed into the jungle from above. It was Bombshell and Starscream, just as he’d described, crashing to Earth thanks to Bombshell’s tackle. They rolled over the broken trees and mud once; dazed, they staggered to standing.

And then... there was no fight, as Starscream had so colorfully described. The two of them stood, as close as was needed for casual conversation, which looked to be exactly what they were doing. The racket of the storm made sound impossible even for Laserbeak’s advanced audios, but Starscream gesticulated a few times to Bombshell, who nodded and said something in response.

The entire room had gone dead silent. In the corner of his visor, Soundwave watched Megatron's optics burn brighter and brighter as they watched the scene unfold. Starscream said something and pointed, back up into the sky, and Bombshell turned to look. That's when Starscream put his null rays right to the back of his helm and fired twice, dropping the Insecticon to a heap on the ground.

Again Rumble whispered, "Holy sh-"

"So you did have time for a chat," Megatron said, biting off each word as if it tasted of acid. "What about, I wonder?" Slowly, ominously, his massive body turned toward Starscream, who stared back with an ashen expression. "No, actually, I don't have to wonder. I already know. You convinced them to work for you, you engineered their petty attacks from the beginning, all to make sure you and your seekers were still worth keeping around."

"How dare -"

"You staged the battle yourself. And when your pawn wasn't looking, you did what you do best and shot him in the back!"

"I bled in that fight, for your mission -"

"And now you'll do it again!"

Megatron's cannon roared to life but Starscream was faster. His null rays hit the cannon and Megatron's shoulder joint in rapid succession and then he darted back before Megatron's good arm could reach him. Bellowing with fury, Megatron fired his backup weapons and Starscream returned fire in kind, the quiet command center exploding into chaos. The holodisplay table burst apart in flames and instinctively Soundwave threw himself over the helpless Laserbeak, trying to shield her. Rumble was knocked to the floor, perilously close to the crossfire, but Jazz rolled over him and then vaulted over the railing in one swoop, disappearing from his sight. Another screen by his head shattered from laserfire and Soundwave yanked the last of the cables free from Laserbeak, then dropped to the floor huddled over her. The shots flew fast and furious overhead, and Soundwave scrambled to get behind cover, not just to protect Laserbeak but for Megatron's sake. Long experience had taught Soundwave that when Starscream threw one of his treasonous uprisings, Megatron didn't want help to deal with it, he just wanted them all to stay out of the way. Starscream was airborne on his thrusters now, and an enraged Megatron leapt straight over the platform railing to follow, but he wasn't as dexterous as Starscream in using them and crashed on the next lower level; Soundwave heard the horrendous splintering of desks and screens, and the terrified shouts of staff scrambling to get away.

"Boss, boss!" Rumble shouted frantically. *"This is fragging crazy, what do I do?"*

*"Escape command room, protect Jazz. Take him to surveillance office, this should provide adequate shelter."* Soundwave had to duck his head again to avoid another stray shot, this one from the overenthusiastic and still hopelessly mistargeting Shockwave. He opened a comlink to Ravage, ordering him to the room immediately, then again to the enforcers.

*"Astrotrain, Blitzwing, immediate action required. Converge on seeker residence, with presumption of hostility, take any necessary action to subdue inhabitants."*

Starscream's exit was cut off when Megatron laid fire on the door, forcing him back behind the impromptu cover of another workstation. Again he fired, but Megatron's plating was notoriously thick and he got nothing but a few scorch marks and an angrier Megatron for his trouble. A full five nanokliks - an eternity on an emergency channel - passed before Astrotrain responded with, *"Huh?"*

*“Starscream, initiated coup on empire,” Soundwave explained tersely.*

*“No shit?”*

*“Wow, he finally went for it,” Blitzwing commented.*

*“Affirmative. And the assistance of his seeker forces not desired, so order repeated to engage their residence before they can participate.”*

*“What, with just the two of us and some wishful thinking?”*

*“You have command over Decepticon infantry. Use it.”*

*“Okay, but this won’t be pretty.”*

The pair of them signed off with a resigned click, and Soundwave realized he would have to hope for the best. There was no other option. Meanwhile, Starscream used a few of Megatron’s missed shots to his advantage and supplemented them with his own, gouging a hole in the ceiling that dropped a ragged chunk of it right on top of Megatron’s throne. He shot through it and transformed, accelerating up and away from headquarters as fast as his engines could take him. Megatron followed, but Soundwave knew it was a lost cause. No thrusters could match a transformed seeker in flight, and Starscream was the fastest of his kind.

Just as quickly as it had erupted into noise, the room went silent again. Soundwave picked himself up cautiously, still cradling Laserbeak in one arm against his chest, dust and charred bits of his own console falling off him as he did so.

Over the wreckage that had been Megatron’s throne, he met Shockwave’s gaze, and knew this would be the last time this room would be so quiet for a long time.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on the rise

*“Astrotrain, Blitzwing, report.”* Soundwave had to sweep what was left of his console clear of shattered glass before he could set Laserbeak safely on it. Two attempts to reboot it got no response; someone’s blasterfire must have hit something critical. Beside him, the toppled holodisplay table spit out a few more sparks that ignited into a small fire he had to put out. *“Astrotrain, Blitzwing, acknowledge. Report required.”*

Still no answer. This meant they were very busy, either killing someone or getting killed, and he hoped it wasn’t the latter. In the meantime he was left without information, an unacceptable situation, so he ordered Ravage to reroute to the seekers’ tower without delay. Below him, he could hear the scuffles and murmurs of dazed workers picking themselves up.

*“Lord Megatron?”* he tried, tentatively, and this time got an immediate response.

*“No good,”* he snarled, followed by a flurry of swearing. *“I lost him. He’s already out of the city and out of sight. Not that I have to wonder where he’s going.”*

Vos, of course. With his plot exposed and Megatron ready to kill, it was only natural that Starscream would flee Iacon as fast as his afterburners could carry him. Now he would seek sanctuary in his home city, on his own grounds, defensible and able to withstand siege. All he would need was his army.

*“Astrotrain and Blitzwing already dispatched to seekers’ towers,”* he said quickly. *“Orders are to intercede and suppress trines.”*

*“Then I will join them. By Primus I will tear someone’s wings off today, even if they’re not his. Meet me there.”*

*“Yes, Lord Megatron.”*

Shockwave was shuffling through the wreckage somewhere nearby, gazing at the once-pristine command room that had been his domain. “- knew he couldn’t be trusted, tried to tell all of you, knew he would do this someday. Nearly killed us all -”

Soundwave ignored him and scooped Laserbeak back into his arms, moving briskly back down the steps and out of the room, pedes crunching on a thousand broken shards of glass and metal. He must hurry to join Megatron, but he would not leave Laserbeak in that battle-torn room, she needed to be in at least the security of his own private office. The halls of headquarters were in a riot of confusion already, Decepticons and civilians unsure what to do with themselves but shouting at one another over how to it. He shoved his way through the mess and into his own office, relieved to find Rumble and Jazz there just as he’d ordered. He was equally *unrelieved* to find the two other Autobot slaves Perceptor and Bluestreak there as well, huddled in the corner and staring at him with pale shellshocked optics.

He shot an exasperated look at Jazz, who hunched his shoulders. *“Noo i cho ya dolzhen byl sdelat’?”* he asked defensively. *“Well what was I supposed to do? Just leave them in there to get shot by a rampaging Megatron? It’s not like it’s their fault.”*

“Time for argument, not available,” Soundwave said crisply. He transferred the wheezing Laserbeak back into Jazz’s arms. “Now, needed by Megatron. Rumble, return Laserbeak and Jazz to medbay,

then convene at seeker towers.”

His gaze fell on the two outsiders and experienced a mild flush of irritation when he realized he had no idea what to do with them. Jazz saw the look on his face and pleaded, *“They’re not talking to me anyway. Can’t they just stay -”*

He cut himself off when Soundwave raised a hand for silence, all of his attention immediately focused on the warning message coming through from Ravage. He’d just reached the seeker towers, barely ahead of Megatron, and -

*“Soundwave,”* Megatron snapped. *“I thought you said you’d sent the triples to the tower.”*

“Affirmative, Lord Megatron. But no resp-”

*“They’re not here.”*

“Triplechangers?” Soundwave asked, confused. “Or seekers?”

*“No one,”* Megatron ground out between his denta. *“No one is here.”*

The room had gone quiet while he spoke, Jazz and Rumble staring at him apprehensively. An uneasy guess formed itself in Soundwave’s mind, and he hoped he was wrong. “Signs of combat?”

Silence, so cold and frigid that he could almost feel Megatron’s fury seeping through the comm waves. No, no signs of combat. There had been no fight, and now there were no seekers, and no triplechangers, and that could only mean one thing. Wearily he shuttered his optics, and cycled a single deep vent.

“Understood, Lord Megatron. Law enforcement officers Blitzwing and Astrotrain now joined Starscream in defection from empire.”

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Megatron wasn’t completely right, as it turned out, that no one was left inside the seekers’ towers.

Without much trouble Ravage scoured the buildings and sniffed out Autobots Fireflight and Groove, up in what Soundwave presumed to be Thundercracker’s personal chamber. They weren’t hiding, he decided, so much as just too scared stiff of the enraged Megatron to make a sound. They still were, too, optics nervously tracking the emperor as he paced and growled across the grounds. Again Soundwave tried to redirect their attention to his questions.

“Seekers, exhibiting odd behavior?”

Neither young gestalt-mech looked away from Megatron, flinching when he stopped to snarl and plow his fist deep into the nearest wall. Soundwave put his hand in front of Fireflight’s face and snapped his fingers twice.

“Autobot. Your personal safety, highly contingent on usefulness of intelligence. Recommendation, answer question. Seekers, acting abnormal in any way?”

The Aerialbot was still frozen stiff, but at least his optics tracked Soundwave, and finally managed to force his lips to move. “N-no sir. No abnormal. They were just... tired. Happy to be home.

Proud.”

“Regarding?”

“The fight, on Earth. Thun- Master Thundercracker described it to me. How the Insecticons took them by surprise, the dogfight in the storm. He knows I like to hear all about flying-” Promptly he clamped his mouth shut, knowing he’d given away more than he should have. “He- he described the battle to me, sir.”

“Did he mention that the entire affair was nothing more than a fixed show?” Shockwave put in acidly, much to Soundwave’s displeasure. Interrogations were less effective when the questioners volunteered information, which was why Soundwave would have preferred to be alone. That not permitted to him just now, he settled for glaring coldly at the interfering Shockwave and hoping he would take the hint.

At least the blank surprise on Fireflight’s face seemed genuine enough. “What? No. They were so tired, and covered in scratches. They were in a fight.”

“Of course he didn’t tell his own wingmates,” Megatron snorted contemptuously, halfway across the courtyard. “He couldn’t trust them to keep their mouths shut. Or not to put on a good show for Soundwave’s optics. He was the only seeker who knew it was no real battle.”

Again Soundwave looked back to the slaves. “Describe seekers’ actions in past joor.”

“Sir. It all happened so fast. I was with- Master Thundercracker and Skywarp were lying down in one nanoklik, then jumped out of the berth in the next. I... think they got a comm. They looked so surprised. Then they threw themselves off the ledge and flew away. They were shouting, but by then I couldn’t hear what they said.”

“It was the same in Master Ramjet’s room,” Groove added. “Except, they ran for the stores of energon cubes first. Shoved as many in their subspaces as they could take. They were about to fly away when Astrotrain and Blitzwing landed on the grounds. I saw everything from the window.”

“And?” Shockwave demanded, earning another irritated look from Soundwave.

“Their weapons were unlocked and primed. I thought they were going to shoot - I think the seekers did too. They looked ready to shoot back. But then Astrotrain said something I couldn’t hear. They talked a little - just a little. Then they all powered down their guns and took off together. I didn’t know what to do, so I went to find Fireflight. That’s when Lord Megatron came.”

“Opportunistic little beggars, your lawkeepers,” Megatron snarled at Shockwave. “And for them, unusually quick on the uptake. They spent their shift awake, for once, and when they smelled Starscream’s coup decided they’ll do better under his banner than mine - which makes them as forgetful as they are ungrateful. Anybody *else* want to jump ship?”

He glowered at everyone in the courtyard, as if daring anyone to speak up to the just-barely-rhetorical question. Shockwave and Soundwave stayed wisely mute. After a nano Megatron just snorted and turned away again. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll kill them all anyway. I’ll meet them on the battlefield, fist to fist, and I. Will. *Kill* them.”

He clapped a hand over the wall he’d been punching holes in and yanked with all his massive strength, tearing it into a pile of broken rubble. The Autobots jumped and clung harder to one another, not even ventilating from the sound of things. Shockwave looked apprehensive too, but he did at least try to help.



“Then we have much to start planning, by your lordship’s will. Defenses for the city, of course. I’ll need to conduct a fresh resource inventory, and schedule strategy meetings...” He trailed off when he realized what Soundwave already knew, that Megatron was not listening. “Er, anyway, I’ll need to at least see to these two. And the triplechangers’ deaf one. Come to think of it, what’s happened to Starscream’s slave?”

“Autobots Perceptor and Bluestreak in personal security office at headquarters,” Soundwave explained, giving what he thought was a straightforward answer to a simple question. Shockwave seemed to think differently, owing to the way he stiffened and flashed him a hostile glare.

“Well, you were certainly quick to collect that one, weren’t you? How... enterprising.”

Ravage growled low in his throat, but Soundwave was not in a mood to argue. “Autobots still there,” he said wearily, “under supervision of symbiote Rumble. Shockwave, invited to retrieve them at earliest opportunity.”

“I will. And let us all remember that our loyalty is first to the empire, now more than ever. It’s not a time to be scavenging through the seekers’ former property and seizing whatever is to be had; anything theirs was theirs by the grace of Megatron, and by this act of treason belongs to him again.”

“Shockwave’s concern, unnecessary,” Soundwave nearly snapped. “Soundwave’s home, sufficiently full.”

“Both of you shut up,” Megatron barked, before Shockwave could fling out another insult. “I’m done - done talking about it and done hearing about it. There’s nothing more I can do about Starscream today, not when he’s already off to Vos with half my army and not a single Decepticon left that could even catch up, let alone stop him. Both of you, go home. Get your rest. Tomorrow we begin a new war.”

Promptly Shockwave subsided, and bowed. “As you command, Lord Megatron. I will begin preparing at once.”

Soundwave bowed as well, in his own characteristic silence, ignited his thrusters, and took his leave.

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For his first night back home on Cybertron, Soundwave had hoped and expected to have his full cohort together under one roof. But Starscream had changed all that, and reconnaissance was too important now to leave until tomorrow. Rumble was at headquarters; Ravage already out on the streets, and only Jazz, Frenzy, and the aerials were there when he entered his home. He had used the washracks at Decepticon command in order to prepare for the debriefing, so it was the first time in cycles Soundwave had been here, and he found it unsettling to walk into this space and find it so unchanged when so much else had. Laserbeak was lying prone on her favorite window seat, whimpering softly, Buzzsaw nestled beside her. Jazz was trying to get a little energon in her with the aid of a dropper, without much success, and regaling to Frenzy all over again the details of what happened in the control room.

Soundwave stopped by the window and bent over, gently scratching the crest of Laserbeak’s helm, and got at least a flicker of pleasure/affection to disrupt her otherwise miserable state. With the

surgery over and feeling returning to her limbs, pain consumed her small body. She wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight, he already knew, and ached in sympathy for his symbiote.

"Is it true, is it true?" Frenzy was demanding. "Did Astrotrain and Blitzwing really take off too? Plus all the seekers?"

"Affirmative. Triplechangers, joined seekers before their flight from Iacon."

"This is all so fragged up. I can't believe Starscream would do this- well, no, actually I can. But now what? Rumble says folks at command are already talking war. Is that true?"

"Yes," Soundwave replied, so much more calmly than he felt. "Megatron, officially declared as much earlier."

"But it's *Starscream*. He's pulled worse than this before. He and Megatron have shot each other up before. But when he left, he always came back. He never... not came back."

"Circumstances different now," Soundwave reminded Frenzy. "Autobot army, not present as common enemy. For Megatron, Starscream now only enemy, and only obstacle to complete rule over Cybertron. This time, no possibility for truce."

Frenzy looked a little glazy-opticked at this, trying to wrap his mind around a reality that had changed so suddenly from everything he ever knew. Soundwave dropped a gentle pat on his helm too. "Go. Join Rumble, explore city. Soundwave requires information on reaction from general public."

"Yes boss."

He would have rather stayed, Soundwave knew, but if Rumble couldn't come home either then the comfort was incomplete. Better for him to go be with his twin, and then they could be useful together. Buzzsaw should have been out there too, gathering his own surveillance, but with Laserbeak in so much pain he would refuse to leave her. Soundwave would not force him. He knelt by their perch and resumed petting and scratching them both, wishing he could do anything to lift the pall in their mood. This cycle had been too long, too full of unexpected disasters, and now he could feel grim exhaustion creeping into his struts.

He also felt, soon enough, the weight of Jazz draping himself over Soundwave's shoulders from behind. "Jazz, requires something?"

"Actually yes. I am still covered in Earth's mud, and it's starting to itch."

"Jazz, capable of bathing self."

"But I want you to do it. C'mon." Gently but persistently Jazz tugged him back onto his pedes, and led him by one hand into the washracks. "Stop giving me that mopey look. You're tired, you're stressed. Do this and you'll feel better."

Soundwave accepted the foam brush when it was pressed into his hand, but he also spoke. "Jazz, may now stop pretending ."

He must have caught Jazz off guard while he was fiddling with the temperature controls, because the response was an uninhibited and shamelessly gleeful snort. His visor was gleaming when he looked back to Soundwave.

"Oh, Soundwave. You really do know me too well, don't you? Fine, since it's just us, I'll say it:

today was a killer show and I had the best seat in the house. I won't lie, I enjoyed it. Far as I'm concerned, Megatron and Starscream both got what they deserved, and I'm truly sorry that they didn't manage to finish each other off. But... if I'm being completely honest, I could have done without the whole charade-de-Insecticon that risked our lives. And nearly got Laserbeak's. The plan was smart, but came with too much collateral damage. I'm glad he got caught."

Under Soundwave's direction he turned, allowing the brush to move in slow steady strokes across his back plating. "What's... gonna happen to the Aubotos? Percy and the kids?"

"Jazz, still concerned for these mecha?"

"Just because they're angry at me doesn't mean I can't wonder if they're okay. Or where they are."

It was a view that Soundwave couldn't quite understand, but he gave Jazz an answer anyway.

"Shockwave, ordered that slaves of all traitors to be housed with Constructicons for immediate future." It was a logical short-term solution; their complex was the only space that had the room and resources to handle four extra mecha. "Most likely eventuality: Autobots will be transferred to Earth camp for refinery work."

Under his fingertips, he more felt than saw Jazz's wince. No doubt he was picturing Motormaster, and what he would do to the newcomers, but when he spoke his voice had a forced lightness to it.

"Well- well that's not so bad. At least the kids will be with their brothers again. And they were lucky they didn't get caught in any crossfire. Could be worse."

He turned again under Soundwave's direction, and for a while was silent while Soundwave knelt and scrubbed his legs. "But what about you?"

"Meaning, not understood."

"You're too calm, even for you. Why aren't you more angry about what Starscream did? It could have got us all killed. Hell, I'm even mad at myself for not catching it earlier - we both saw what perfect timing this emergency on Earth was for him. I should have known it was no lucky coincidence, should have guessed what he was up to. But I didn't, and we got bitten and chewed up by a thousand rogue drones just so he could prove to Megatron that he's worth keeping around. You should be *furious*."

"Soundwave, angry."

"You don't look it," Jazz observed, pointedly. "You look... sad."

The brushstrokes slowed, then stopped, Soundwave's hand falling back to his side. Jazz was right, but Soundwave didn't want to tell him why. He didn't want to tell Jazz of all mechs that he was *sad* to see the Decepticon empire break apart like this, to watch all his hard work to salvage this government destroyed in the space of a day. All his struggles, his enduring patience, the bargaining and the compromises... it had all come to nothing. Worse than nothing, in fact, and now Soundwave dreaded what was to come.

"Soundwave and symbiotes, enjoying life of peace," he finally said, and he had never been more truthful. "These years, first extended period of peace since earliest years for Rumble and Frenzy. First period of peace *ever* for aerals. Now, war here again. Time for small symbiotes to be pressed into military service, again."

"Oh..." Jazz exhaled, understanding and sympathy flooding across his face. "I'm sorry."

He switched off the flow and stepped aside, while Soundwave knelt unmoving, but in seconds he

was back and wiping down Soundwave with soft towels. With a gentleness normally reserved for the littlest ones in this home, he patted dry Soundwave's face and helm, kneeling to face him directly.

"I mean that, I want you know. I really am sorry. But everything's gonna be okay. They are very good at what they do, Soundwave. And *you* are the best at what you do. You're going to be just fine."

It was habit for Soundwave to retract his mask in the washracks, and now Jazz took advantage of that by tipping forward and kissing him softly. Surprised but not unwilling, Soundwave responded in kind. It was only gentle comfort, at first, but Jazz did not pull away, and soon enough Soundwave felt fingertips curling more urgently against the edges of his armor, glossa pushing ever deeper.

When he did break apart, just to recalibrate his ventilations, he had the look of a mech nowhere near ready to end it. Instead he pulled Soundwave to his pedes, again, this time leading him into his own berth chamber. His visor glowed with anticipation, his armor parted and loose.

"Jazz?"

"I don't know if I have the words," Jazz murmured thoughtfully, "to describe what happened that night in the jungle. What you did for me- what you did *to* me. There was touching, and sparks flying, and... when my music just started playing on its own, well. No one's ever gotten my body to do that before. And now that we're finally home, together, I find myself thinking about it over and over - and *over* - again." Without letting go of Soundwave's hand, he twirled a languid circle as they neared the berth. "I guess what I'm trying to say here is -" Suddenly he was right back in front of Soundwave, all space between them disappeared, his voice just a husky whisper. "*Rock me. Please?*"

It was a request Soundwave could never have resisted, and he did not try. Without hesitation he bent forward and kissed Jazz, as eagerly as Jazz had done in the washracks. Jazz pressed up to meet him, arms wrapping around his neck to get better traction. The difference in their heights was too awkward, so Soundwave gathered Jazz up against his chest and sat him down on the berth with a thump. There wasn't so much as a meow of protest, nor when Soundwave pressed Jazz backward onto his back and crawled on top of him. Jazz's fingers were everywhere, coasting up and down along the lines of his armor, teasing and tickling him in all the places he knew so well. Half a joor ago Soundwave could have sworn he didn't have the energy to do anything more than fall over into recharge, now fresh bursts of electricity cascaded over one another and raced through his frame. The two of them rolled back and forth across his berth for a bit, until Soundwave finally settled to stay on his back and let Jazz be on top. It was worth it, to see the delight sparkling in his visor, gasping with pleasure as he rode Soundwave to completion. He ground their hip joints together until the overload came, him first and Soundwave soon enough after.

Jazz erupted into a flurry of colorful French obscenities and then dropped into a sprawl across Soundwave's frame, panting. His grin for Soundwave was wan, but genuine. "*Je suis désolé,*" he wheezed. "*I'm sorry, I was too eager. But I have more.*"

"Jazz does not need to apologize for experiencing pleasure."

Jazz chuckled softly in response, heavy ventilations winding down as his internal temperature normalized. Eventually he propped his chin up on a fist, the cant of his visor amused. "How come you never speak French to me?"

The absurdity of the question threw a minor block in his processing loop, and Soundwave had to replay it for total comprehension. Finding it still made no sense, he asked the only thing he could. "Relevance?"

"I'm always speaking it to you and I know you understand me, but you never use it or any other human language to answer me. What is the point, o great communications director, of learning such beautiful languages if you're never going to speak in them?"

"Soundwave knows all languages used in any environment for purposes of reconnaissance and surveillance. Conversation in them, unnecessary."

"It's not necessary, it's romantic. We're in your berth, and I'm nuzzling you and whispering sweet nothings in French, and I want the same in return. *S'il vous plaît*," he wheedled, exhaling hot little puffs of air into Soundwave's seams. "*Parlez vous français? Parlez vous? Parlez vous?*"

Oh for- Why must he always press so determinedly for such ridiculous things? Soundwave huffed in bemusement and traced a heavy finger over Jazz's audial. "*Soundwave, le fait de parler maintenant le français.*"

Silence. Jazz stared, mouth slightly open, and then Soundwave felt the stirrings of something deep within Jazz's frame. He convulsed once, then succumbed to paroxysms of silent writhing. He rolled off Soundwave and onto the berth, gasping for enough ventilation just to be able to make his laughter audible. Soundwave scowled, and continued to do so for every nano the laughter kept going.

"Extended display of amusement, unnecessary. Jazz did make request."

"I'm s- I'm sorry," Jazz wheezed. "I'm sorry. I did ask. I just... didn't expect you to actually *do it*. Soundwave *spoke French* to me. And it was *terrible*."

"This, reason that Soundwave converses in Cybertronian," he said huffily. "Human languages, unsuited to personal mode of verbal expression."

"Translation: I am too taciturn and methodically factual to use a beautiful romance language, or pretty much organic language ever. Pity." Jazz clambered back on top of Soundwave, his grin still wide, but he dropped a kiss on Soundwave's lips. "I'm sorry for laughing. It was sweet of you to try. And you don't ever have to do it again. Please, never again."

"This assurance, given." He hooked his fingers into Jazz's scapula plating and pulled him down into another kiss. Jazz melted into it, the full length of his frame undulating gently against Soundwave's armor, one pede sliding up and down along the inner seam of Soundwave's leg. It felt wonderful. Soundwave relished it, but he was not the only one who'd needed an uplift for his mood tonight. After a few more kliks' worth of enjoying Jazz rubbing against him, Soundwave shifted his balance and rolled them over again. Deliberately his hands found Jazz's wrist joints and pinned them firmly to the berth, most of his weight pressing against his frame.

"Jazz, trusts me?"

Trapped underneath him, every reason to be nervous, Jazz didn't even hesitate. "Sure I trust you. Why?"

"Soundwave, intends to fulfill longstanding promise to symbiotes," Soundwave explained. "This requires Jazz's willing participation. Instruction: remain relaxed. Do not resist."

Already small tendrils of his consciousness were reaching out, curling into Jazz's mind, his touch as light and noninvasive as could be done - similar to what they'd done that night in the danceclub. Jazz was quick to realize what was happening to him, but aside from a small twitch he didn't move. He didn't fight Soundwave, didn't struggle in the slightest; he only lay still, watching Soundwave with trust and just a touch of curiosity in his gaze. It was no pretense; soon enough Soundwave

didn't just see it but felt it too, skimming through the topmost layer of Jazz's feelings without quite entering his mind completely.

And then...

Then Soundwave started lowering the walls. First it was Ravage. He was out in the city when Soundwave found him, prowling the worst of the ghetto alleyways. He'd been expecting to spend the night alone, and Soundwave felt his flash of surprise at the sudden connection. Surprised, yes, but not at all unwelcoming. Still angry at the seekers and anxious for his family, Ravage fell into Soundwave's arousal in a single headlong rush. It was a pleasure to feel and also a pleasure to watch Jazz gasp with mild shock. His back struts buckled upward before he flattened himself against the berth again, vents cycling hard.

"What the- what is that? I can feel..."

"Ravage," Soundwave supplied, when Jazz couldn't articulate it. "Consciousness, now linked."

"I can feel him," Jazz whispered, awed. "I can feel him, inside me. And I can feel you." He opened his mouth and exhaled lightly against Soundwave's throat cables, then shuddered at the light prickle of pleasure it triggered within Soundwave. "I can *feel* you, feeling that!"

"Affirmative." Soundwave lowered his head and kissed Jazz again, relishing the twin sensations he could feel through his own sensors and in Jazz's mind. Ravage could feel all of it and was purring in pleasure, the feedback from which circled back through Soundwave and into Jazz. Jazz's own engine kicked into a purr in response, vibrating deliciously against Soundwave's chest.

"More," he moaned. "Please, more."

"Request, acceded." More walls came down, and again Jazz bucked and arced against Soundwave's frame.

"Oh fr- who's that?"

"Rumble and Frenzy, now included." To Soundwave, their twin surges of ecstasy and delight were as noisy and colorful as their actual presence, and equally unmistakable. For Jazz, who lacked his experience, he only knew he could feel two more foreign minds linking to his own, and doing so with all due haste. The twins were overjoyed to finally be included, and already on top of one another to revel in their own interface. The rush swept right back from them through Soundwave and Jazz, who was still moaning and writhing underneath him.

"Jazz, still functional?"

"More than," Jazz wheezed. "Keep going."

Very well, he would. The last guards came down, enveloping Laserbeak and Buzzsaw into the whirlpool of sensations. Buzzsaw was shocked at the sudden inclusion, but not displeased. And Laserbeak, for the first time since she'd woken post-surgery, wasn't consumed by her own pain. Her giddy thrills shot through all that misery like bubbles in high grade. Her joy overflowed into all of them, spilling through Soundwave's mind into his link with Jazz.

Jazz's systems were starting to strain to the point of keening, but Soundwave did not think he was unhappy. By now he was barely moving, too overwhelmed by his own mind to pay much attention to the body. Soundwave, who had much more experience navigating multiple perspectives in his own mind, could keep better focus. He sat back into a kneeling posture, then wrapped Jazz's legs around his own hips and began to thrust.

Jazz cried out, throwing off snaps of electricity in his own body and feeling Soundwave do the same, which was then promptly multiplied five times over by the sharing symbiotes. Hazy blue light warping back and forth across his visor and vague pleading grunts indicated to Soundwave that he should keep going, and he did, rocking his hips in careful and measured pace against Jazz's exposed joints. This time there was no need to rush. His symbiotes drank in every passing second like it was the sweetest grade they'd ever tasted, their distinct reactions braiding together and weaving through all present minds to such an extent that Jazz probably couldn't distinguish his own pleasure from theirs. If he even cared. Soundwave was glad he liked it, but someone so inexperienced in this could be broken if pushed too far. He let down all his own inhibitions and climaxed into overload, and felt Jazz's mirror overload swamp him in return.

Jazz collapsed limply against the berth, drawing air as best he could, and gently Soundwave peeled their minds apart. The walls stayed down, however, allowing his symbiotes to relax and enjoy the gentle throb of a good overload ebbing away. With equal care he extracted his body, and lay down beside Jazz on the berth.

"Jazz, still functional?"

A blue spark snapped on the visor and then extinguished back into darkness, all the effort Jazz could make toward unshuttering his optics.

"No," he breathed. "How can I ever be again?"

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## on the fall

It was still early when Soundwave cycled out of recharge the next morning. He had to disentangle himself very carefully from Jazz, whose only reaction was a mumbled grunt and to curl into the warm spot Soundwave left behind. Soundwave set a small decanter of coolant by the berth and left him to his sleep. Out in the common room, he was pleased to find, Laserbeak was actually in a state of semi-restful recharge. The emotional and mental exertions of their shared interfacing last night must have worn her out so thoroughly that her body had no other choice, exactly as he'd hoped would happen. He refrained from petting her lest she wake, and left the loft by way of his thrusters.

At headquarters, he opened the door to his office and was immediately tackled by the twins, each clambering onto a shoulder and jabbering streams of ecstatic descriptions, praise, and pleas to let's-do-that-again-really-really-soon-okay?

"Jazz, left in state of total exhaustion," he pointed out, patiently plucking each twin off and setting them back down on the edge of his console. "Perhaps some time needed to recover. Now, your attention required for surveillance. Report public reaction to yesterday's events."

Rumble and Frenzy visibly deflated, then exchanged uneasy looks. Even if he hadn't been brushing against their bare emotions, Soundwave couldn't miss the forecast of bad news.

"You won't like it."

"Megatron won't like it."

"City, favorable to Starscream." Soundwave said it for them, and they could only hunch their shoulders and nod. "His actions on Earth, known?"

"Oh, it's known. But they don't believe it -"

"- or they don't care."

"Some are sayin' that if it's true and he did, it was only to protect himself from Shockwave."

"Others say you made it all up, under Megatron's orders."

Instinctively Soundwave bristled at this offense to his professional integrity. "Soundwave does not invent false surveillance."

"Try explaining that to a black market full of mecha who think Starscream was the only Decepticon that ever spoke for them."

"Soundwave!"

Both twins jumped and yelped when the screen behind them lit up with Megatron's face, nearly toppling right off their perch. Soundwave put a hand out to steady them just in time, bowing at the same time.

"Lord Megatron."

"Report to the command room immediately. I am ready to begin."



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Shockwave got in an excellent start. With his usual poise, he tapped away at the one remaining functional console and spoke as if he couldn't even notice the dangerous fury still silently radiating from Megatron's frame.

"Now then. I know, my lord, that you ordered us to go home and rest last night. But I simply couldn't recharge in such circumstances, so instead I began work on inventory resources." A few taps pulled up long lines of charts and graphs, filling every working screen around the perimeter of the command deck. "I have prepared contingency budgets of the fuel we can afford to consume in combat, each depending on exactly what date the seekers attack the city and accounting for the size and scale of any hypothetical attack. By subtracting their allotments, I've found it's a reasonably resilient ratio - notice my margin of elasticity here. This is actually a conservative estimate based on current production resources. It's safe to assume we'll see output rising in the near future, since the traitors were 'considerate' enough to leave us their slaves. We outnumber their forces easily, and Iacon's ground-to-air defense system would make any assault raid a suicide run. Starscream's war is already over for him, before it ever began."

He clasped his hands across his broad torso plate, looking quite pleased with himself. Megatron's expression was turning to a shade somewhat less angry, and after glancing through a few of the charts he nodded. "Good work, Shockwave. Soundwave, do you have anything to add?"

Over by Soundwave's cracked monitors, Frenzy winced a little in expectation. Soundwave chose his words with caution. "Megatron... should allow for possibility that Starscream not need to attack Iacon."

"Of course he has to attack," Shockwave snorted dismissively. "Vos is an empty wasteland, without resources. He has nothing to feed his troops except what they could carry. They must attack, if only for an energon raid."

"Starscream also has Astrotrain," Soundwave reminded them all. "Strike against Earth not impossible, and Earth, not easily defended."

"They would never have enough fuel to make the trip!"

"At this time, the extent of Starscream's resources not completely known. Therefore, unwise to assume exactly what Starscream capable of."

"Well," Shockwave sniffed, "Given recent events I suppose you would be the resident expert on playing his fool."

*"Slagsucker."* Across the room, Frenzy's optics flashed bright crimson. *"Who spit in one-eye's high grade anyway?"*

Soundwave suppressed a small sigh. *"Frenzy, recall that without Autobot army, Megatron and Starscream now lack common enemy."*

*"Yeah, so?"*

*"Without Starscream, Soundwave and Shockwave now lack common enemy. Expectation, Premier will now do whatever possible to eliminate me from command circle."*

*“That motherfr-*”

“Soundwave, see to our long-range scanners,” Megatron decided, after more back-and-forth with Shockwave. “Ensure that we’d see Astrotrain or anyone else trying to leave Cybertron’s orbit. And prepare your spies, at least two of them will be on mission to Vos very soon. You’re right that we need more intel on the enemy. They *will* provide it.”

By traveling across the treacherous landscape of Cybertron’s old battlefields, through perfectly silent and still ruins to reach Vos, where Starscream would be expecting them. Soundwave said nothing, and only bowed his head.

“In the meantime, Shockwave, I want you to make it known that the empire is officially recruiting new Decepticons to serve. I am in need of more soldiers, and raw recruits are better than nothing at all.”

“Of course, Lord Megatron. I’ll vet candidates and -”

“I will vet them,” Megatron corrected crisply. “In fact, I already have one mech in mind that I want you to invite directly. A worker in the east refinery named... oh what was it, Soundwave?” Idly he snapped his fingers, not really looking at his subordinate, or he might have noticed the way Soundwave stiffened. “You know, the one with the paint job.”

“Designation: Hot Rod.”

“Yes, that was it. Hot Rod.”

Shockwave’s optic flickered, not quite able to filter all the distaste out of his tone when he repeated, “A... refinery worker?”

“That’s what I said. Is that a problem?”

“Of course not, my lord. I will send a courier immediately. And I will prepare a general announcement for the empire’s broadcast later this cycle, encouraging all loyal subjects to apply.”

Megatron grunted his consent, then turned toward the stairs. “You’re both dismissed for the moment, but don’t go far. I want a drink.”

Dread curdling in his fuel tank, Soundwave watched him bang and stomp his way to the lowest floor, calling for his slave, and took one step to follow.

*“Don’t.”*

Soundwave paused, and turned to where his symbiote was still trying to repair his console.

*“Frenzy?”*

*“You’re about to go tell him that he’s missing, because you’re honest and you’re loyal. But don’t, please.”*

*“Frenzy, obligation is -”*

*“Soundwave, look at him. He’s already so angry.”*

Down below, they watched him snatch the energon cube away from Bluestreak, then brace one of his massive hands against the slave’s head and shove him so forcefully away that he hit the floor and

rolled once. But then Shockwave pushed his way past Soundwave, jostling not-quite-accidentally against his shoulder, and Soundwave knew he had no choice.

*“Other options, not available now,” he told Frenzy. “Shockwave will learn before end of cycle that this mech disappeared, and will seize opportunity to tell Megatron. News, must come from Soundwave.”*

He felt Frenzy’s gulp, but steeled himself to descend the steps. Megatron was pacing about at the lowest level, staring at the wreckage that most of the workstations had become, and didn’t seem to notice his approach. Though he was accustomed to patiently waiting by Megatron’s side until addressed, this time Soundwave had to make a small sound in his vocalizer just to catch his attention.

“Lord Megatron.”

“What?” Megatron snapped. “I said I wanted a break.”

“Understood. But information regarding this refinery worker must be relayed.” At that Megatron finally looked up, still annoyed but interested enough to listen. Internally, Soundwave wilted.

“Shortly before departure for Earth, surveillance extended to him for... routine curiosity. However, this mech not found.”

Megatron blinked. “What?”

“Could not be located at refinery, or listed residence in ghetto. Workmates indicate his disappearance, unexpected. Initiated search, but Earth -”

“He’s missing?” Megatron broke in, when the meaning had finished sinking in. “You *lost* him?”

His volume jumped sharply and in the corner of his vision Soundwave could see Shockwave peering over the stair rail with extreme interest. “It’s your job to watch the mecha in this city! You knew I wanted that one, you knew and you *lost* him.”

“Search, interrupted by mission to Earth. However, prepared to resume -”

“Oh, just forget it. You have other things to do, and he was a nobody anyway.” Apprehensively Soundwave saw his fist had warped and crumpled the cube, energon dripping like spilled mechfluid onto the floor. With nothing else he could think to say, Soundwave only bowed his head.

“Understood, Lord Megatron.”

“Any other bad news for me, while you’re at it?”

From above, Soundwave sensed Frenzy’s terrified cringe, and could well understand the feeling. But Megatron had asked... and Soundwave must give an honest answer.

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“Well, that could have gone better,” Frenzy commented sourly, trying to clean the energon smears from Soundwave’s mask without putting too much pressure on the painful dent Megatron’s fist had left behind.

“Could have gone worse too,” Rumble countered. “Boss is lucky Megatron remembered he’s got a better punching bag upstairs for this sort of thing.”

“He’s still royally pissed, and that makes me not want to walk around HQ alone right now. It’s so unfair! It’s not like it’s our fault half the city is rooting for Starscream.” Frenzy growled and threw his rag down in disgust. “We’re just the cameras! We just *record*. We’re not the ones doing anything!”

“Shh, Frenzy.” Automatically Soundwave pressed against his symbiote’s agitation with a pulse of comfort. “Becoming more upset, not any help.”

“You’re right. Let’s do something more fun, like figure out who gets to make the suicide run to Vos. For Starscream, it’ll be like shooting down turbofoxes still in the turbine barrel.”

“Frenzy. Soundwave will never allow harm to come to you.” He rested his hand atop Frenzy’s head, but it was pushed aside with a growl.

“Tell that to Laserbeak.” He dropped off Soundwave’s knee and stormed out of the office, door slamming behind him. Rumble exhaled, a little shakily, his shoulders dropping low.

“He’s already sorry he said that. You know that, right?”

“This, known.”

“Are you really going to make us go out to Vos for recon?”

“Megatron’s orders must be obeyed,” Soundwave reminded him, and ached to see the look on his face. “Soundwave will find safe path for symbiotes.”

Rumble did not look completely convinced, but he looked away to the monitor bank rather than pursue the question. One of the screens showed Jazz back at home, brushing Buzzsaw’s wings while he chatted unidirectionally to Laserbeak, trying to keep her amused.

“He’s been up for a while. Ain’t it time for you to go feed him?”

True, Jazz was well overdue for a refuel and must be so hungry. But the dent still throbbed, a reminder of his recent failure, and there was still so much more work to be done. If he left the building now, Shockwave would surely know about it and then Megatron would too.

“To leave headquarters now, not appropriate.”

“Then I’ll go home and bring Jazz here.”

“My preference, not to have Jazz and Megatron in same building just now. Megatron’s mood... dangerous.”

“Ah, good point. Whatcha gonna do, then?”

“Rumble, may take small recess from work. Return home, draw energon cube for Jazz. Tell Jazz he is permitted to drink it.”

“Whoa.” Rumble’s jaw swung open a little. “You sure?”

“At this time, no other choice available.”

It seemed like he’d been running into that same problem since he woke up. Resignedly Soundwave

turned to his desk and began sorting surveillance.

---

The day was long and miserable, not just for Soundwave but for Laserbeak too. His monitor showed Jazz doing his best to amuse her and Buzzsaw to comfort her, but through the symbiotic link he felt her deep, aching pain of broken wings. The flightlessness hurt worse than the physically shattered struts did. It was enough to make Soundwave keep an optic out just for Hook, and when spotted in the monitors he moved swiftly to intercept him. He was right there in Decepticon Command, even, and Soundwave found him by the elevator trying to arrange a broken, unconscious Sunstreaker on Long Haul's flatbed.

"Surprised he lasted this long," he grunted, when he noticed Soundwave standing by and watching. "Considering what's happened. The other one will be coming along soon enough; he never lasts long when he's the only one left."

"Soundwave, prepared to schedule surgeries for final repair of Laserbeak."

"I'm a little backed up just now, as I think you can see."

Soundwave had no intention of taking no for an answer; Laserbeak was suffering too much to even consider it. "Laserbeak's functionality required for Megatron's purposes. Needed for impending reconnaissance to Vos. Hook, still willing to delay repairs?"

Technically Megatron hadn't ordered it be Laserbeak who carried out the mission, but it was not a lie to say she was needed and Soundwave was not above pressuring the medic through any means necessary. Hook was already hesitating, looking doubtfully between him to the mangled Autobot at his elbow.

"Well... I guess Aid can handle most of this mess. Primus knows he's had the practice. Fine. Bring her around at the start of the work cycle tomorrow. I can't promise to be done by the end - you know how delicate wing strut surgery is."

"Understood, and accepted." Soundwave inclined his head and departed, satisfied.

It was the only thing that had gone right, by the end of the cycle. For the rest of it he ground through joors of surveillance, all of it discouraging. Everywhere he looked, civilians were arguing, debating what Starscream had done. They argued that he'd been forced into it, tricked into it, that it never happened at all. They argued that Starscream had been forced to flee Iacon, that he was innocent, that he was the better Decepticon over Shockwave. Or Soundwave.

Or Megatron.

It was conversations like this that he had to compile, bundle into his report, and send to Megatron by the close of the cycle. He was grateful he would not be in the same room when it was read. Then and only then did he turn his back on the office and go home. Laserbeak had fallen into recharge again by the time he arrived, Buzzsaw drowsing beside her. Jazz was on the floor by their window, surrounded by a handful of folded foils in partially complete stages, trying to repair the mistakes he'd

made to one of them. His grin for Soundwave was faintly abashed.

“I remembered it’s her favorite thing when she’s grounded, but I’m not as good at it as you. She was... unimpressed, I think. And now we’re out. Maybe we can get more tomorrow?”

Soundwave considered the recordings he’d been analyzing all day and shook his head. “Walking in that sector of Iacon, perhaps not safe now.”

“Oh. That bad, huh?”

“Affirmative. In any case, Laserbeak scheduled for surgery in next workcycle. She will not be grounded much longer.” He moved to sit on the couch and his gaze fell on the energon dispenser - that and the cube on the table next to it, full to the brim with energon and sitting untouched. “Jazz, Rumble instructed to relay permission to refuel alone.”

“He did. But I couldn’t.” Jazz shrugged his shoulders, even more self-conscious now. “Didn’t feel right. I knew you only let me cuz you had to, and that you wouldn’t be happy about it. I want you to let me drink this when you *want* to.”

He picked up the cube and settled himself next to Soundwave, holding it out in offering. He didn’t even take it, right away, too stunned to do anything but stare at his slave. Jazz... for the first time ever, had turned down a chance to feed himself even knowing he could get away with it, even knowing Soundwave had given explicit permission. He chose submission over independence, not for his own sake but for Soundwave’s. The training had come full circle.

In such stark contrast to the rest of his unpleasant day, the act left Soundwave overwhelmed. In silence he tipped forward and kissed Jazz, expressing gratitude in the only way he could think of to do in that moment. He kissed him thoroughly and well, and when done, dropped his head and nuzzled him a little more on his most sensitive neck cable. Only then did he pull away and accept the cube from a somewhat breathless Jazz, and proceed to feed him in slow careful sips.

It took a little time, and when the cube was finally emptied Jazz exhaled in relief, glad to be full again. He slid into lying down, resting his head on Soundwave’s lap, where he was content to be petted and Soundwave was content to pet him.

“Want to tell me about your day?”

“Negative.”

“Okay.”

And that was that. Jazz was quiet until they both fell into recharge.

Soundwave came online disoriented. He wasn’t in his berth but had fallen into recharge on his couch, sitting up and tipped forward slightly with Jazz fast asleep on his lap. On the window seat, Laserbeak was still dozing fitfully. The comm alert wasn’t affecting them -

The last of Soundwave’s cognitive functions kicked in and he realized he was being hailed, on a frequency he didn’t recognize. But just by looking he could tell it was a long-range comm from outside the city, which meant it could only be one mech. His ventilations hitched apprehensively, and at last he accepted the hail.

“*Finally,*” Starscream teased. “*What, did I actually wake you? I expected you of all mechs to be*

*burning the mid-night cycle oil."*

*"Starscream, reason for contact?"*

*"To say thank you, I suppose. It was messy, not like how I planned it... but any later and I might not have made it out at all. I am not a fool, Soundwave. I know how close he was already."*

*"What -"*

*"So, no hard feelings, okay? I just wanted you to know that."*

*"Starscream -"*

*"Gotta run, so much to do! But don't miss me too much, I'm sure we'll be seeing each other very soon."*

And just like that the connection shut down. Jazz whimpered in his sleep, and belatedly Soundwave realized he'd begun to squeeze his shoulder in a crushing grip while Starscream spoke; hastily he pulled his hand away. What did he - Starscream could be so purposefully opaque when he wanted to be, and for such a short conversation - if you could even call it that - he'd managed to say so much that made so little sense. Soundwave recorded the frequency and reversed the hail, but Starscream wasn't interested in answering. He persisted in trying anyway and was on his fourth attempt when Rumble sent him a comm of his own.

*"Hey boss, bad news. That mech you wanted me to check out - I can't find him."*

*"Rumble, this much established several megacycles ago,"* Soundwave reminded him impatiently, his attention still on Starscream. *"And now, preoccupied with -"*

*"No, boss, not that missing mech. Another one. Remember, that triplechanger Octane?"*

Octane. Uneasy dread kicked up in Soundwave's fuel tank, as Rumble's meaning came through. Yes, that young triplechanger, Soundwave certainly remembered flagging him for special scrutiny. Recalling his personal relationship to Astrotrain and Blitzwing, it seemed more than likely he would betray himself as a dissident to the empire. Now he was missing *too*?

*"Provide all details,"* he ordered, and felt Rumble's sagging resignation on his end of the link.

*"You should probably just come see this."*

---

The lawkeepers' office had been raided. There was no other way to describe it. Weapons lockers had been busted open, their contents emptied, fuel cells unhooked and carried off. Closed-end terminals that probably once housed information on criminal records had been smashed against the floor, their hard drives stolen. It was a perfectly thorough mission of stealing assets and sabotaging the enemy as Soundwave would expect from Starscream, and Octane had done the job well. No, not just him - one mech could have never managed to steal away so much equipment without attracting attention. Back in his own office, Soundwave accessed the records of his cameras in HQ's own halls, sifting through joors of yesterday's footage at rapid clip. They were everywhere, now that he

knew to look, inconspicuous mecha walking quietly through the corridors, only ever carrying one rifle at a time, nothing looked at twice in Decepticon command. Gradually, over the course of the work cycle, Octane and his band of thieves had emptied a major cache of weapons and fuel and walked away without anyone noticing.

“How could you *let this happen?*” raged Shockwave, not very much later. “You’re director of surveillance! How could you *not notice* mecha walking away with our own weapons and fuel, our own *property?*”

“Notice taken,” Soundwave said frigidly. “Discovery, only even occurred due to heightened scrutiny. Reminder: surveillance designed to monitor dissident activity and then alert law enforcement. Soundwave somewhat prevented from this task when heads of law enforcement have abandoned posts and fled city with other traitors.”

“We’ll use those hundreds of expensive cameras you insisted on and find them on your own. Now!”

“Soundwave, unable to do this.”

“Because you think you don’t answer to me? Because you think I haven’t got the authority to expect you to track down and bring back a pack of petty traitorous thieves that your own incompetence allowed to succeed in the first place?”

“Negative. Cause of inability, this.” Soundwave imported his surveillance feed into the nearest monitor, flipping through frames of his many cameras, following Octane’s mecha as they wandered away from Decepticon command and then through the city, out into the poor districts, into the unrepaired sectors, past the last of his cameras and then disappeared from his sight altogether.

“Thieves, no longer inside Iacon. Thieves, defecting to join Starscream.”

While Shockwave gaped, Soundwave started importing more surveillance tracks. “These mecha, not alone. Surveillance collected from cameras around outermost periphery of city show individuals moving outward, all within most recent cycle. Expectation is that migration more populated than can be accounted; as Shockwave stated, surveillance cameras expensive, and judiciously placed in more populated sectors for thorough surveillance. Their coverage in unrepaired sectors, sparse.”

Across the monitors images flashed, showing glimpses of Iacon’s neutrals - not really an accurate description, anymore - smuggling themselves through the grimy outermost sectors. Their paint was cheap, possessions on their back few. They were the poorest and most ragged mecha of the city, mecha that had lost their businesses to Shockwave’s licensing demands or suffered a whipping after the riots. They were the ones with nothing to lose, the ones who had always formed the base of support for Starscream. Now they would form his new army.

“We- we will shut this down,” Shockwave gasped. “Now! Set up a perimeter around the city, immediately, with all the lawkeepers!”

“All lawkeepers dismissed,” Soundwave reminded him.

“Hire them back!”

“Former lawkeepers, substantial bulk of identified migrating population. Former lawkeepers, responsible for raiding lawkeeper office for weapons and fuel. Presumed motive, mistreatment by Shockwave and termination by Megatron. No doubt chose to follow Starscream because situation can only improve.”

“So you’re saying this is *my* fault now, that it’s my doing and not Starscream’s causing mass



citywide insurrection?”

“Where?”

Both of them jumped and whirled around to find Megatron at the edge of the command deck, arms crossed and optics hard. How long had he been there? Normally Soundwave would have heard his heavy tread, noticed his approach, but now Megatron seemed almost unnaturally quiet in the face of their own noisy argument.

“I- my lord... I apologize that you have to hear such upsetting news, Soundwave and I were just -”

Soundwave let Shockwave talk while he simply moved to answer the question, importing all recorded migratory activity into a single graphic overlaid on Iacon’s map. Shockwave’s voice faltered when it appeared on the screen, and Soundwave fully expected Megatron to at least growl, but still he was quiet. The edges of Iacon, normally so motionless and dark in Soundwave’s surveillance reports, now flickered with activity registering in the hundreds. They ranged all around the circumference of the city, well out into its porous borders, without order or concentrations. There was no specific point to target, no obvious path being chosen. Iacon had not been host to a traditional battle for thousands of vorns; their defense system was a ground-to-air design, not an actual fence. Now the ghettodwellers and bottom-feeders of Iacon were exploiting that fact by taking the simplest action against the empire they could - walking away from it.

“Obviously,” Megatron said, “the city’s security needs work. On both your parts: monitoring, and infrastructure.” Deliberately he looked at each of them in turn, then turned back to the steps.

Soundwave was wondering if that would really be all when his pede landed on the first stair and he paused. “I don’t think this arrangement is working, by the way. We are at war again, and it is no longer appropriate for my two top officers to be living elsewhere. I need more of you than just your day cycle shifts. So make your arrangements, and prepare to move into Decepticon Headquarters before the end of the orn.”

Soundwave only needed a sideways glimpse of Shockwave’s expression to know they were both dismayed by the order. Shockwave was passionately proud of his beautiful mansion, in which he’d resided for so many centuries, and Soundwave... was going to crush the sparks of his symbiotes when he relayed the news. His family loved their home, loved the luxury of civilian life it had come to mean for them in the years since war’s end. The twins’ entertainment center, windowed perches for Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, his hax table... all of it would have to be left behind.

They could only bow in understanding, and obedience. Megatron wasn’t looking, but he knew.

“Soundwave, with me.”

---

It was when they reached Megatron’s destination, some desolate edge of the city, that Soundwave realized Megatron wasn’t just ‘angry’. He was out of his mind with fury, the most enraged Soundwave had seen him since before the end of the war. The quiet control snapped the moment his thrusters switched off, all his rage bursting out of his shoulder cannon and aimed right at the two unlucky mechs that had picked that exact spot to try and desert Iacon.

“How could they, Soundwave?” he snarled, as the bodies flew through the air and hit the ground with an ugly thud. “How can they *do* this to me? Well? I am their leader, their savior! I have done nothing but preserve their very existence, and they *don’t care*. They just turn their backs at the first

hardship, and run! They run away from me - just like he did. Starscream betrays me, and then everyone else betrays me so they can follow him instead. He would be nothing without me, do you know that? *They* would be nothing without me. And still they leave! *Everyone betrays me!*"

He tilted up his face and bellowed his rage to the sky, blank and uncaring that it was. There was no answering movement in the ruined buildings around them, nothing on Cybertron so much as twitched in acknowledgement. Megatron screamed his fury for as long as he liked, but eventually even he had to give up. Wearily he slumped onto the nearest pile of wreckage and went still.

Cautiously, Soundwave approached and knelt before him.

"Soundwave, here, lord Megatron. Soundwave, always loyal to you."

It took a few astrosecs for the words to penetrate, but when they did, Megatron managed some kind of a wan smile. "You're right, Soundwave. You're always right. You are... always there for me."

Encouraged, Soundwave nodded firmly.

"Where did it all go wrong? They were so happy after the war's end. Do you remember the mid-vorn, how they cheered and waved? They loved me... or, I thought they did. Why did they stop loving me?"

Soundwave hesitated just long enough to make sure it wasn't a rhetorical question, that Megatron really did expect an answer, and spoke.

"Soundwave, would like ability to present Lord Megatron with one single reason. But this, probably not possible. Mistreatment by lawkeepers hindered ability to operate small businesses. Subsequent riot led to rising fuel prices. Resentment at prices..." He trailed off when he saw Megatron's optics narrowing.

"So it's Shockwave's fault?"

"Some decisions unwise, but not Soundwave's intention to lay full blame -"

"Starscream's then."

"Negative, meaning misunderstood. Fault, not belonging to any one Decepticon. Series of events and consequences brought about current situation. Fault no more or less due to any office within empire."

"So it's the whole empire's fault then. And I *am* the empire, so it's my fault?"

"No, this not -"

"How dare you?" Megatron hissed. "You watched them betray me, and look for what *I've* done to find the blame? You're my director of surveillance; *you* are supposed to be watching *them!* Why not do that and find out what's gone so wrong in their processors that they would rather have Starscream than me?"

He punctuated the question by striking Soundwave hard across the face with his fist, hard enough to knock Soundwave over to the ground.

"Soundwave! Soundwave, are you alright?" With the force of the blow still ringing through his head, dizzily Soundwave felt Megatron's hands grasping at his shoulders, pulling him back up onto his knees. Anxiously Megatron's fingertips brushed across the dent on his mask.

“That was too much, I didn’t mean- please, forgive my temper. I just lost my second bot to the medbay, and with Starscream gone I- I just don’t have my usual outlets available to work through my frustration. You must know how much I respect your opinion.”

Now Soundwave was almost inclined to gape, more stunned by the semi-apology than the blow itself. Mood swings, violent outbursts, these were characteristic of Megatron in a temper. Contrition was not. “Understood,” he said belatedly, when he realized Megatron was watching him expectantly.

“It’s the betrayal- I’m not... taking it well.”

“This, observed.”

“I ask myself why; it’s not as if it should be a surprise, right? It’s nothing he hasn’t done to me before. But with the war behind us, it’s different this time. To be honest, it- it hurts. It feels as if he stabbed me in the spark, not the back.”

“Understood, Lord Megatron.” It was only at that moment that Soundwave remembered Starscream’s comm, and that he hadn’t even reported it yet. He activated his vocalizer, then hesitated. Megatron would want to know why he hadn’t said anything sooner, and Soundwave would have no answer - at least not one that would satisfy Megatron in his paranoid mood. He also wouldn’t like it that Starscream called Soundwave, and not Megatron himself. As for the words actually spoken, Soundwave felt strangely uncomfortable repeating them to Megatron. Something about Starscream’s tone seemed almost... friendly.

“You’re a lucky mech, Soundwave,” Megatron murmured, interrupting his thoughts. “I suppose you never have to worry about treachery amongst your own subordinates.”

“Negative. Cassetticons, built for loyalty. Once earned, cannot be rescinded.”

“How nice. But...” A strange thoughtfulness filtered into his optics, as he gazed down on Soundwave. “They’re loyal to *you*, aren’t they? Not me.”

The look on his face made Soundwave suddenly uneasy. Carrier protocols buzzing nervously, he thought fast. “Cassetticons’ loyalties are Soundwave’s loyalties. And Soundwave, loyal to Megatron always.”

Megatron stared, optics cold, and Soundwave felt his ventilations go still, but then he broke into a smile. “Of course. As if there could be any doubt. I’d have never made it this far without you.”

His vents expelled a gust of hot air, sounding refreshed. He rolled back onto his pedes, bracing one hand on Soundwave’s shoulder for brief support. “It’s been a difficult few days for me, Soundwave. I do not wish to spend the night alone. Bring your slave to my quarters tonight, at the onset of the night cycle. I feel I could do with his company.”

And just like that, Soundwave’s spark nearly stopped right in its spin. He froze, there on his knees, and stuttered the most useless response he could have ever done. “M-Megatron?”

“Yes?” Megatron replied calmly, trying to brush some of the ubiquitous ash from his plating. “Is there a problem, my loyal director?”

A thousand arguments, pleas, and bargains sprang to Soundwave’s mind and stayed there, too dangerous to be said aloud. This was no time to refuse Megatron, already so consumed with paranoia and distrust. Refuse and Jazz would probably die for it. Maybe Soundwave too. There was no room for refusal, not here.

“Negative, Lord Megatron,” he answered, and could only be grateful that his impassive monotone covered any of the pain crushing his spark. “Symbiote Ravage will escort Jazz to Decepticon Headquarters at designated time.”

“You will bring him,” Megatron corrected. “And not an astrosec late, Soundwave. I look forward to it.”

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## on dangerous ground

Laserbeak didn't understand the reason for his distress. Cradled in his arms there in the medbay, she nuzzled at his wires and transmitted constant reassurances that everything was going to be fine, that soon she would be repaired and flying free. And she did her best, though she failed, to hide her confusion for why she was the one doing the reassuring instead of the other way around.

Soundwave said nothing to clarify the reason - how could he? He'd only transferred files to all of them about the escaping citizens and let them draw their own assumptions for his bleak mood.

Absently Soundwave caressed her in response, picturing her face when she learned the news. She would be crushed.

"... at which point the larger struts will be repaired enough to support my work on the finer ones. I estimate another 3-4 joors for that part alone; you know how complex their structure is. Then comes wing platelet transplant. My slave is already prepping the plates, and he'll be responsible for integrating them into her wings; has to be done while the struts are still healing, or it will be impossible to get them on. She's going to be under for at least the next full cycle, maybe cycle and a half."

Hook's mouth just kept moving, the words following him around the room in a constant trail of noise that Soundwave only half-heard. Absently his gaze moved through the glass observation wall and into the next room, and happened to fall on First Aid. He was staring at Soundwave, but when he caught his optic he quickly looked away and backed out of sight.

"So Shockwave informs me that we're going to build a wall," Scrapper said, pulling Soundwave's attention back into the room. When did Scrapper walk in? Had he been there long? "Around the whole city, apparently. That should be loads of fun."

"Yes, and how very inspiring," Hook added flatly, snatching an instrument out of Scrapper's hands when he tried to toy with it. "What does it say about a government that has to build a wall to keep its own mecha in, rather than keep its enemies out?"

"Watch it, Hook," Scrapper warned, in the well-worn tone of one who had given such a warning many times before, without looking away from Soundwave. "So I explained to Shockwave just why a completely impassable wall would be virtually impossible to build - let alone all around the city.

And he said to me, quote, 'Construct the fence, not excuses.' *Very* motivational. At least there's nothing we can do until the rain comes and goes. It'll shut down Megatron's little immigration problem too - for the time being. No one's going to want to be outdoors by next cycle, the acid count is up to 63% in the clouds last I checked."

"Rain," Soundwave repeated, blankly.

"Yes, rain. The clouds have been moving in since before you all got back from Earth. Haven't you looked up since then?"

Soundwave accessed the weather datafeed and realized it was true; particulate matter was gathering above Iacon for the first time since... well, Soundwave didn't need to think about that. This looked worse than the last time too, the acid yield was drastically higher, enough to cause serious damage to anyone caught outside. He hadn't even noticed.

"Soundwave, preoccupied with other matters," he said, and Scrapper rolled his optics.

"Don't we all know it. Rampaging rebel seekers and their triplechanging henchman, say. You

going to let her go, or what?"

What? Soundwave looked down and saw that Hook was holding out his arms for Laserbeak, clearing his throat for possibly the second or third time to attract Soundwave's notice. Reflexively his hands stiffened their grip, falling back on primitive carrier protocols not to give up his precious injured symbiote. But she needed surgery, and Hook would fix her. He set aside the old protective twinge and transferred Laserbeak carefully into Hook's arms. She chirped sweetly at him as she was set down on the table, and he watched Hook plug a buffer line into her dataport. Scrapper watched too, thoughtfully.

"Hook told me about what happened on Earth. He was right to keep his mouth shut until Starscream wasn't around; it's too bad your bird didn't have that luxury. You must be itching to pound that seeker into dust more than any of us."

Soundwave barely heard him, watching Laserbeak's optics fuzz over and grow dim. Her connection to him through the symbiotic link, so bright and strong, did the same. He strained out to reach her, trying to hang on, but she slipped away from under his touch and vanished completely. Even though she was right there on the table two steps away, she was gone. It was too close to what had just happened, and suddenly Soundwave could not stand to be in the room.

"Soundwave, required back at Headquarters," he announced abruptly. "Send notification of any developments."

Hook looked up, surprised. "You're not going to stay and watch? You always stay."

"At this time, too much work waiting to allow for such delay," Soundwave answered, his explanation unfortunately quite true. "Soundwave's expectation: that surgery will conclude successfully and without incident."

He fixed Hook with a meaningful stare just then, and saw a flicker of nervousness cross his optics. Good enough. Soundwave bowed his head, and left the medbay.

---

Soundwave had never worked so hard, and remembered so little of it. Throughout the course of the workshift surveillance was streamed, studied, and analyzed. Dissidents were caught, their names recorded, marked, and added to the grim list that he then delivered to Megatron. He did nothing else for three straight joors, and afterwards he wouldn't be able to recall a single detail of any of it. He only powered down his office, left headquarters, and returned to his home, mechanically following a routine he'd give anything to ignore. If he could, he'd stay in his office all night, work himself into stasis just so he could give Megatron better data. He'd do anything at all right now to please Megatron, give him everything if he could, but tonight Megatron wouldn't want it anyway.

The only thing he did want was currently perched on the back of his couch, good-naturedly cheering on the twins as they fought their way through some vicious video game. They were using the one break Soundwave had granted to them today, and probably already running over on it by this point. Soundwave, though, had no rebuke for them.

"Hey boss!" Rumble greeted, without peeling his fingers from the controller or his optics from the screen. "We're almost done with this one level."

“Then we’ll get back to work,” Frenzy added.

“Promise!”

They were concentrating too hard to notice his lack of response, but Jazz was looking at him.

“Hey,” he accused. “You took Laserbeak into surgery this morning, didn’t you? I would have gone with you, you know. What, did you wait until I was in the washracks before you came home and picked her up?”

That was, in fact, exactly what Soundwave had done, though he said nothing. Jazz drew his own conclusions anyway.

“Wow, Hook really does not want me back in his medbay, huh? He’s just sore that I snuck out of it so easily. But then, I did promise to be quiet, so he can’t blame me for *not* bothering him for permission. Ah well, just so long as I can come with you to pick her up, that’ll be good enough.”

Still Soundwave was silent. Confused, Jazz squinted carefully at him and tilted his head a fraction.

“Bad day at the office again? Rumble and Frenzy told me about all the neutrals leaving the city. I had a good gloat all worked up... but I don’t think I actually have the spark to lay it on you right now, you look so bummed out.”

The dread inside him was growing stronger, he knew it when he felt the twins flinch and hesitate.

Finally they looked away from their precious game and back to him, frowns in their optics. Faced with a still-silent Soundwave, Jazz plucked up an uncertain smile.

“Uh, you know what we can do to cheer you up?” Smoothly he rolled off the couch, moving toward the far corner of the room. “We should get back to our hax game tonight. We haven’t played in such a long time. If we leave it much longer, I’ll forget whose turn it is.” Idly he extended a fingertip to tap it against one of their gamepieces.

“Boss?” Frenzy asked uneasily.

“*Boss?*”

“Megatron, commands Jazz to visit his chambers tonight,” Soundwave said, at last. Jazz’s hand slipped and knocked the piece right off the set, and it clattered to the floor. Such a small piece, on the far side of the room, but he heard it strike the floor anyway, heard it over the twins’ shocked wails of dismay.

“Say *what?*”

“He commands *what?*”

“But he can’t do that, Jazz is yours! Ours!”

“You don’t have to, right?”

“You told him no, *right?*”

“Megatron’s orders must be obeyed,” Soundwave said stiffly, never taking his optics off Jazz. He knelt, fumbling to retrieve the piece he’d dropped, and from here Soundwave could see his hands shaking.

“But-but it’s not fair! Just because he put his own bots in the bay, he can’t just *take Jazz.*”

“You’re working harder than anyone to keep his empire glued together, why you? Why not take someone else’s bot? Like one of the traitors’!”

“Yeah, tell him to take one of those!”

“Rumble, Frenzy, stop.” It wasn’t Soundwave that spoke, but Jazz, his voice suddenly hard.

Soundwave watched him arrange the gamepiece carefully back in its place, before he turned back to face them. “Just, stop. Don’t make this harder for Soundwave than it already is. You know he can’t say no. Skywarp sure couldn’t. This… it’s nothin’ I haven’t done before. So, so many times.” The light rolled behind his visor, and he managed a sardonic grin. “This is nothing. It’s a chore, like monitor duty. All the Autobots take a turn now and then.”

The shaking vanished. Soundwave watched Jazz lie to his symbiotes, all glib tones and carefree chuckles, and saw their shoulders droop with reluctant acceptance. Their optics were still sulky, but no longer blazing with furious defiance.

“It’s not right.”

“It’s not fair.”

“Ain’t much about Megatron that’s ever been right or fair, far as I’m concerned.” Jazz shrugged and pivoted to lean back against the couch, addressing Soundwave with perfect nonchalance. “So when? Right now?”

“Onset of night cycle. Some time left, if return to headquarters conducted by flight.”

“Then let’s leave now and walk instead, if you don’t mind. We haven’t had a chance to take a walk in ages. You can feed me on the way.”

“We’ll come with you!”

“Thanks kids, but I’d like to be alone with Soundwave right now. Could use the downtime.”

Again their shoulders slumped, and Jazz dropped an affectionate hand on each of their heads in turn. “No worries, right? I’ll be back by tomorrow morning, and so will Laserbeak, and then everything will be back to normal.”

They mumbled assent, even though Soundwave could still sense their sparks whirling with distress and anxiety. One of their own was being taken, and they were not built to share. They kept their mouths shut but Soundwave could still hear their frustrated howls, pressing against his end of the link and receiving only empty comfort in return. He had no words to make this better, no reassurance he could honestly give. There was only the fact of Megatron’s order, and his duty to obey.

Humming softly, Jazz collected his chains and presented them to Soundwave for application, as if he hadn’t slithered in and out of them a hundred times since the day he moved in. Soundwave watched himself latch them on, and turn to follow Jazz to the door, turning his back on the twins and the betrayal etched so clearly into their faces. He could not, however, turn his back on the pain in their sparks.

*How could you?* He could feel them asking, even if they didn’t dare vocalize the words. *He’s yours. How could you?*

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“Jazz, may now stop pretending,” Soundwave said, once they were outside the building. Jazz’s response was a slow, pitying smile tilted his way.

“Shows what you know.” He didn’t allow Soundwave a chance to argue before he leaned in, mouth open wide in expectation. Dutifully Soundwave dropped an energon treat in it, experiencing another ache in his spark in the process. Jazz was his, and this simple ritual between them proved it. How could he give him up?

“C’mon, Soundwave!” Jazz wheedled, and squeezed the edge of his battlemask with an affectionate pinch. “Turn that frown upside down already. You’ve been in such a funk about displeasing him lately. This is your chance to make him happy! He could have gone to Shockwave instead, for Chromia, but he didn’t. I’m glad he didn’t. And you should be flattered too. In fact, promise me you’ll rub it in Shockwave’s whatever-passes-for-his-face later on. It’ll torque him off so bad.”

To this relentless cheer, Soundwave could only sigh. Along the empty streets they walked, and passed the corner where one would turn to reach the remains of Iacon’s markets. For no discernable reason that he could think of, Soundwave found himself remembering their very first walk, when Jazz had spun away from the planned route and cemented a habit that would become theirs forever. Then, the stalls were numerous enough to spread all the way up to here and spill out around the corners. Now they couldn’t even be seen. The arrests and riots had taken their toll, and recent fluctuations in Shockwave’s power meant merchants could never be *quite* sure if permits were required or not. And so their numbers had shrunk to a fraction of what they used to be, with most of the missing ones following Starscream out of the city.

“Kinda sad, isn’t it?” Jazz spoke up. He too was looking that way, visor glowing softly with regret. “To think, those mecha will probably never... get to see me dance to Michael Jackson again. Shame.”

He shrugged and glided back into their walk, with a little hop-skip for good measure. “Speaking of which, I’ve been working on some new jokes to fit this latest turn in politics. Stop me if they’re too awful. What do you call a Starscream fan living in Iacon? Lost. What do you call a Shockwave fan in Iacon? Imaginary! What do you call a Megatron fan, anywhere at all on this whole planet? Call him ‘Premier Shockwave’ unless you want to get in trouble.”

Soundwave let the meaningless jabber roll over his plating as they closed the distance to headquarters, his attention on Jazz and not the silly jokes tumbling out of his mouth. The closer they got the faster they came; he stumbled on pronunciation more, backtracked and repeated himself. Soundwave watched him clench his fists to hide the trembling, then unclench them and shake out his fingers to relieve the stiffness. They entered Decepticon Command, almost empty at this hour and dead quiet in the halls.

“How do you suppose Shockwave fires his own staff that decided to leave Iacon? Mails them a pink slip, maybe? Wouldn’t that be great. Drone delivery to Vos: sign here, please. ‘Due to completely-foreseen circumstances, inasmuch that I am a troll who worked you to near death and barely paid you, the time has come for you and this office to part ways. Sign here to acknowledge termination of pension benefits.’” He laughed to cover the fact that he actually missed the lift button on his first try, and hastily slapped his whole palm against it. The doors slid apart, they entered, and still Jazz’s mouth would not stop moving.

“What do you think the new faction will call itself? Starscream can’t keep using Decepticon, it’s

taken, he'll have to come up with something new. Primus help him if he tasks Skywarp and Thundercracker to be on the marketing committee, they'll just pitch him names like 'Seekerites' or 'Vos-Boys'. And he can't declare war on Megatron without an army that sounds the part."

Past level two now. Soundwave felt as though he might break if he had to hear Jazz force one out one more word, because if anyone should be speaking now it was Soundwave. He owed him at least - what? An apology? An explanation? What good would it do anyway, when they kept moving closer to Megatron's home, what good would *words* do for Jazz now?

Told himself that, but his vocalizer activated itself anyway. "Jazz." The word broke into Jazz's flow of chatter, making Jazz bite his glossa and look up at him in surprise. "This," he tried, desperately hunting for the right words. "This- is not what I-"

"Don't," Jazz said quickly. "Just, don't."

"But-"

Without warning Jazz leapt at him, using momentum and a deft tug on Soundwave's shoulder plating to plant a kiss firmly on his mask. "I forgive you, okay? You can't help it, you can't say no.

Because you're loyal to him. There's nothing else you could have done. Unless you let me go.

Kidding!" His smile had almost faltered and hastily he hiked it back up. "I'm kidding, of course. There's no way you could do a thing like that."

He just kept on smiling up at Soundwave, his visor a careful blank as if to say, "*Right?*", but Soundwave had no more words left in him. The lift glided to a stop and the doors parted, and Jazz breezed out into the corridor. Megatron's door loomed large before them, cold gray steel etched with the sigil of their faction - their empire, the cause for which Soundwave had served most of his life.

Jazz waited before it, tapping one pede idly against the other, and after a few moments looked from it to him.

"Well?" He tipped his head to the waiting keylock. "He's your boss, after all."

Yes, this was only the truth. If it was anyone's responsibility, it was his. He pressed his hand to the keylock, and felt the tingle of it scanning for his signature. More time passed, the longest .75 klik of his life, during which Soundwave almost let himself believe he'd been mistaken. But then the lock clicked, and Megatron opened the door.

"Soundwave!" The door opened to reveal Megatron's cheerful and welcoming smile, a sight so foreign that the shock practically rooted Soundwave's pedes to the floor right then and there. "Right on time, as always. Come in."

He barely looked at Jazz. He just stepped back, arm sweeping toward his home's interior in invitation. "It's good the rain didn't start early - I was a little worried. Come, come."

Belatedly Soundwave forced his pedes across the threshold, and Megatron clapped a friendly hand on his shoulder. With the other he waved vaguely in Jazz's direction. "Pour us three drinks, slave, something bubbly. I assume you remember where my mixing station is."

Jazz, already the picture of blank astonishment, hesitated. "Three?" he repeated uncertainly.

"That's what I said."

He was already on the move, steering Soundwave toward his common room, and didn't even look

back. For just a moment, Soundwave wondered if he had read Megatron's order completely and totally wrong. Maybe Shockwave was here too. Maybe all Megatron ever wanted was a late meeting with his officers and an Autobot there to serve drinks. He let himself imagine it, nearly let himself believe it, but then they entered the room and he saw the empty furniture, and knew he was wrong about that too.

Soundwave had a feeling that Megatron sensed his confusion, but if so, then he said nothing to explain. He just made himself comfortable in his favorite chair, and indicated for Soundwave to sit opposite. This allowed them a view over the city, through Megatron's lavish floor-to-ceiling glass walls. It was a view that had always been a glowing, vibrant landscape. But now the buildings were dark and lifeless, many of them probably empty. Soundwave found it awkward to look at them with Megatron in the room - not that looking at Megatron was much better. He was still *smiling*, so brightly that it was setting off quiet alarms all over Soundwave's processor. He was no stranger to Megatron's mood swings, but this was not right. This... was unbalanced.

"Megatron," he finally ventured, "received pleasing report today?"

"Oh no," Megatron said promptly and without a flicker in his smile. "You sent me a long list of dissidents caught on tape speaking up for Starscream. Remember? And I don't even have any lawkeepers left to go and arrest them." He laughed like it was a great joke, and Soundwave felt himself inch back in his chair just a little. "But it's alright! I've decided not to be upset about that."

"... really?"

"Yes. Because I'm going to fix it. *We* are going to fix it." He circled a finger between the two of them demonstratively. "The Decepticons have been in lower places than this, Soundwave. I know you remember. We've been lower, and yet we still won in the end. This will be no different."

Megatron beamed at him, and Soundwave could find no words to argue. "Soundwave, pleased by your confidence."

"Good, that makes two of us." Idly he beckoned Jazz from the doorway, who was clutching three flute glasses and looking more bewildered than ever. He covered it up as only Jazz could and served Megatron first, dipping gracefully to one knee, and then gave the second to Soundwave. He was opening his mouth to ask Megatron what to do with the third when Megatron cut him off, gesturing to the space besides Soundwave.

"Go on, take a seat."

Jazz stared at Megatron. "I... beg your pardon, my lord?"

"Sit, I said. After all, you're here too."

Soundwave thought Jazz might actually gape; his lower lip twitched like it wanted to fall open, but somehow he managed to control it. Gingerly he lowered himself onto the seat next to Soundwave.

"Have a drink," Megatron prompted, and Jazz clutched at the glass in his hand.

"I- I am not allowed to take fuel except from my master's hand."

"Oh, that's right." Megatron nodded as if just remembering, though Soundwave suspected otherwise. "Well, he's right there. I'm sure he will help you out."

The light behind Jazz's visor kept turning paler and paler at the edges, but obediently he passed his glass to Soundwave. He didn't take his optics off Megatron until the last possible second, until the

moment when Soundwave actually tipped the glass to Jazz's lips, over the rim of which Jazz fixed him with a terrified *what's-going-on?* look. Not that Soundwave could have answered him, even if he knew. Gently he angled the glass and allowed Jazz a small sip. Megatron's optics brightened with interest at the action, but he said nothing. After Soundwave pulled the glass away, he sat back in his chair with a pleased look.

"That's more like it. I want you to enjoy yourself, Jazz. In fact, I had Soundwave bring you here tonight because I wanted to thank you."

This time Jazz failed, and his mouth fell wide open. "What?"

"For your help, on Earth. I was rereading Soundwave's report earlier, and I was struck again by your actions going above the call of duty. You alerted Soundwave when you heard the enemy. You risked your own life to search for his injured symbiote in the jungle. And, though he didn't explicitly say so, I expect you probably assisted Soundwave with that explosives business underground. I know it's more your style than his." He winked jovially at Soundwave, like he'd caught him in a silly prank. Jazz was still gaping.

"You don't... mind?"

"Why would I mind? Seems I have enough trouble keeping my own soldiers loyal -" For the first time the smile faltered, and Soundwave saw his fist reflexively tighten before he forced it open again. "So if an Autobot slave can contribute in any way to a victory, then who am I to argue? Therefore, you have my gratitude."

He raised his glass to Jazz and helped himself to a generous swallow. Jazz looked like he might fall off his chair at any moment. "I- uh, thank you."

"Go on, take another drink. Don't be shy. You too, Soundwave, you haven't touched yours."

Stiffly Jazz repeated the motions of taking another sip from Soundwave's hands. Soundwave had to override his subconscious threat assessment protocols - twice - before he could get his facemask to retract, and obediently took his own tiny sip.

"Why did you do it?" Megatron asked, looking genuinely curious. "Help? You know it wasn't expected of you; you're unarmed."

Diffidently Jazz shrugged. "I'm an Autobot, we like to save the Earth. We're kinda stupid that way."

Megatron barked with laughter and slapped his knee; Jazz flinched and tried to hide it. "He is funny," Megatron gasped, shaking a finger in Jazz's direction. "An amazing job you've done with him, Soundwave. I remember when I assumed he'd just keep mouthing off until I got tired of it and killed him. Yet here you have him, literally eating out of your hand, not only tamed but actually willing to fight alongside you and risk his life in a Decepticon's battle. And afterwards, he was with your symbiote during her surgery. He brought her to headquarters, risked punishment to get her to your side when he knew it was important. Almost as if he were..." Megatron paused, considering the next word with great care, "*loyal* to you."

Soundwave tensed. "Autobot's progress, pleasing. However, much work still to be done."

"Maybe not, if what I hear from Shockwave is true. He says that on the day I tried to give Jazz back to the seekers, your Autobot put up a public fuss about it. He wanted to stay with you- demanded to stay with you, even. I was surprised, not to mention intrigued. The most obstinate and stubborn

slave in the whole batch clung to you so hard he had to be dragged away.”

He was talking to Soundwave but his stare had settled back on Jazz, devouring him with intense scrutiny. Helplessly Jazz stared right back. “I confess, Soundwave, that I am somewhat envious. A thousand vorns with Starscream and I could never quite reach what you’ve managed to get from your slave in just one Earthling year. What is your secret, I wonder?”

He asked the question so lightly that Soundwave wasn’t quite sure whether it was rhetorical or not, and so said nothing. But the silence hung uncomfortably between them, Megatron watching him expectantly, waiting for an answer Soundwave didn’t know how to give.

“Skywarp forgot to feed me!” Jazz spoke up, just when Soundwave was casting urgently for something to say. His visor blushed slightly when Megatron looked his way, and he lowered his gaze. “My lord. He forgot... all the time, sometimes three days in a row. I was starving to death. But Soundwave feeds me like clockwork, always remembers. I wanted to stay with him so I could live. That’s all.”

Megatron processed this, taking his time to do it, and Soundwave could not be sure if he believed Jazz or not. “Well, Soundwave?” he asked at length. “Would you agree with him? Is that ‘all’?”

Megatron had known Soundwave for such a long time. He knew as well as anyone how Soundwave did not like to lie. He picked his words carefully. “This much known: seeker masters, incompatible with Jazz for many reasons. Soundwave, equipped with superior patience and intelligence to properly tame Jazz, and teach him appreciation for his new environment.”

Megatron was studying Jazz again, quite thoughtfully, and took his time to respond. “Well. That... seems plausible enough. Patience never was Starscream’s strong suit. Nor mine, to be honest. When I want something, I just reach out and take it. Always have.”

His stare stayed on Jazz until he paused to drain the last of his glass. Exhaling a little ‘ahh’ of satisfaction, he plunked the empty flute on the arm of his chair and resettled himself. “Now then. Let’s see this ‘dancing’ for which you are so famous.”

For the second time Jazz’s mouth fell open. “Sorry, what?”

“I’m sure you heard me,” Megatron said pleasantly.

“But, I... for *you*?”

Megatron’s optic ridges rose just a fraction, and quickly Jazz tried to fix it. “I mean, I didn’t think you cared for such ‘decadent’ pastimes. My lord.”

“Well, neither does Soundwave. But from what I hear he’s taken plenty of opportunities to enjoy your ‘decadent pastime’. In public, no less. I want to see what all the fuss is about.”

Anxiously Jazz twisted his hands within their steel bonds. “I really cannot give a proper performance in these chains.”

“Then your master will remove them.”

“I’m not sure this is enough space -”

“I said *dance*!” Megatron’s fist dropped sharply and smashed his empty glass into a thousand tiny shards; promptly Jazz leapt to his pedes.

“Okay, we’re dancing! If the emperor commands it, then who am I to refuse?” His voice shook only a little under his smile, as he extended his wrists to Soundwave for unlatching. “Does my lord have a special song to request?”

“A what?”

“I’ll pick. In fact, I think I have something just right for the occasion. I hope you will not be disappointed, Lord Megatron.”

The cuffs fell away from his wrists and Jazz backed away from Soundwave, flashing him another alarmed look in the brief moment Megatron could not see. Soundwave could only watch in silence, dread compounding by the second, wishing he knew what was coming and partly afraid to find out. He’d never seen Megatron in such an unpredictable mood, and by extension such a dangerous one. The only thing Jazz could do now was continue to please him, by whatever means necessary. Tensely he curled his hands around his forgotten drink and watched Jazz pace lightly between them and the Iacon landscape. Music trickled softly from his speakers, and in the next moment he had begun.

Soundwave watched, in the sense that he kept his face turned toward Jazz, but most of his attention stayed on the corner of his visor tracking Megatron. At first Megatron simply watched blankly, not knowing what to expect, but as the music developed in complexity and volume so did Jazz’s dance. This was one of those done in a slow style, full of sinuous motions and impossible postures. He didn’t dance badly; his core programming probably didn’t allow for it. What did this one mean to Jazz, Soundwave wondered. What did the human’s words mean, to feel ‘it’ coming in the air tonight?

Jazz twisted, dipped, and arched his back over, elegant as lasers sweeping across the night sky. Unhappily Soundwave watched Megatron’s optics shift from mild curiosity to amazement, excitement, and then finally desire. He was so aroused the he could not wait until the end of the performance, and true to his own words, was not patient enough to try. When Jazz moved too close, it was the work of a second to reach out with one of his long arms and snag Jazz by the wrist, dragging him effortlessly off his pedes and onto his own lap. Without relaxing his grip he went for Jazz’s exposed wrist joint, biting and licking the wires within. Jazz gasped at the suddenness of it but didn’t struggle, just scrambled to keep upright and swallow back his cries when Megatron bit too deeply.

The music dwindled away to nothing. Eagerly Megatron moved on from one joint to the next, his trademark grunts of pleasure all too familiar to Soundwave. Since he had not been dismissed, all he could do was continue to sit there and watch, every agonizing second tearing another shred at his spark. He mustn’t complain, mustn’t say anything - Megatron was only testing him, testing his loyalty. Soundwave could endure this.

Jazz, though, kept shooting nervous glances at him while trying to obediently submit to Megatron. He bit back another yelp when Megatron’s denta burrowed into his inner forearm joint, and decided he could take no more.

“Shall I, uh, wait for you on your berth, my lord?”

Immediately Megatron looked up, bemused. “And why would you do that?”

“Because...” Jazz was genuinely flustered now and it showed. “Because that’s where you usually, um, put me until you’re ready for me.”

“I am ready for you now.” Megatron licked his gloss along the edge of Jazz’s armor plating and Jazz

bit his lip in effort not to react.

“But I can do much, much more for you in your berth chamber, my lord. If you will allow me...”

He stroked the back of his hand down the flank of Megatron’s chest armor, skimming over a seam that was one of Megatron’s favorite hotspots. Megatron sucked in a ventful of air, optics flushed crimson.

“So eager to please, tonight.”

“You know me, my lord. Always happy to please you in the berth.”

“Yes... I *do* know you.” The grip on Jazz’s arm, the same arm he’d broken all those megacycles ago, began to tighten. Jazz’s mouth fell open in a silent cry of pain. “And you are only ever eager to please me when there’s someone else in the room to protect.”

He looked right at Soundwave, then back to Jazz with a cruel smile pulling at his lips. “What is it, Autobot? Are you worried about your master? Afraid I’m going to make him watch? Are you, a lowly Autobot slave, actually *worried* about your master’s feelings?”

“No, I just -”

“You should be rather more concerned about yourself, shouldn’t you? Are you more loyal to a Decepticon now than your own safety?”

Megatron was shifting the ground faster than Jazz could keep up; petrified, he stared back at Megatron and tried to get help. “*Neviem túto hru,*” he babbled in rapid Slovakian. “*I don’t know this game. Help me, tell me what to say -*”

Megatron slapped Jazz neatly across the face, cutting him off. “There’ll be none of that tonight, little spy. You will speak Cybertronian, and you will speak to *me* as you answer my very - simple - question. *Are you loyal to Soundwave now?*”

“He’s been good to me,” Jazz whispered. “He remembers to feed me. We play hax -”

“Pathetic.”

Abruptly Megatron shoved Jazz off his lap. He tumbled to the floor with a squawk and hastily scooted away, vents wheezing, optics fixed on Megatron as he stood over Jazz in a tower of rage.

And all at once, Soundwave realized he’d read Megatron wrong from the beginning. They weren’t here for Megatron to test Soundwave - Megatron was testing *Jazz*, and Jazz was failing fast.

“Who do you think you are, anyway?” Megatron snarled. “Besides a whore who’s only alive so I can properly reward my soldiers? Do you think you’re worth even a tenth of what he is?”

Soundwave is the finest of my Decepticons. Strong, smart, and more loyal than any of them.” He circled behind Soundwave, his hand gliding up the length of Soundwave’s arm and over his shoulder. “Soundwave has served me for centuries. Through the worst of our battles, the most desperate times of starvation, he has always been there. Do you understand me, Autobot?”

Soundwave is mine - on the battlefield, and off. He has been mine on many, many nights.”

Suggestively he stroked Soundwave’s neck, and Jazz looked away. “What do I care what you Cons do to each other?”

“You may not care, but I expect you to understand that Soundwave is mine. *Not* yours.” Without warning Megatron’s light stroking tightened into a grip that turned Soundwave’s head aside, right before Megatron shoved his mouth into Soundwave’s. Soundwave was too shocked to react even if

his own natural inclination to obey would have allowed him; he couldn't remember the last time Megatron had kissed him. It was too intimate, too vulnerable, too *trusting* for Megatron to allow such a thing with his own soldiers. But kiss him Megatron did, and not quickly, exploring Soundwave with his glossa, pushing deeper and more urgently as the nanokliks ticked by. At first Soundwave noticed only his astonishment, then the quiet whirr of his vents gasping to compensate. Then, unhappily enough, he heard something else: the unmistakable growl of Jazz's engine. He heard it, and he knew Megatron heard it too; he sensed him pause and then renew the force behind his kiss. Helplessly Soundwave's hands curled into fists by his sides, wishing he had the ability to speak to Jazz now and warn him. *Stay quiet*, he pleaded mentally, for all the good it would do. *Don't react, don't argue, don't -*

"Stop it, stop it!" The growl erupted into a full-throated roar, Jazz on his pedes and fists clenched. "Get off of him!"

Megatron pulled free of Soundwave, unhurriedly, licking his lips and optics glowing with triumph. Already Jazz knew he'd lost, Soundwave could see the despair in his visor. He swallowed, but kept his head held high.

"I knew it," Megatron breathed. "You do want him for yourself. You love him! You think you can love *my* Soundwave? You think you can take my Soundwave from me?" In no time at all Megatron had closed the distance between them and struck Jazz hard enough to knock him to the floor. Promptly Megatron hauled him right back up, shaking him like a broken tool. "Soundwave is mine! Not yours! And since I obviously have to, I will remind you both of that fact *all night long*."

Those were the words that marked the beginning of Soundwave's nightmare. Everything had gone wrong so fast, out of his control, beyond his reach to save. That's how the three of them came to be here on Megatron's berth. That's why Soundwave had to watch Megatron push Jazz down onto his knees, spread his legs, and grind hard into his joints from behind. Was Soundwave holding Jazz in comfort, as he yelped and cried out from the pain, or just holding him down? Soundwave didn't know anything anymore, it seemed. Jazz did try to kiss him, desperately lunged to do it once he could reach, but then Megatron growled and tore him away, threw him aside so he could take his turn on Soundwave.

It shouldn't have hurt. Soundwave was a big mech, not like Jazz, well equipped to handle Megatron's powerful electrical surges, and he had done this for Megatron so many times before. But Jazz cried when he saw Megatron straddle Soundwave's hips and begin to thrust. He took Megatron's wrist joint into his mouth and tried to entice Megatron's attention back to him, unsuccessfully. Jazz was more loyal to him than Soundwave was loyal to Jazz, here in this surreal horror, and Soundwave ached from the shame of it. But he did nothing to correct it, couldn't, because still Megatron ground into him, dropping low to kiss him again, Soundwave receiving him dutifully and obediently. Megatron was his leader, and Soundwave was loyal to him too, always had been. Loyalty warred against loyalty, left him battered and breaking on the inside.

Megatron had brought them here to prove his dominance over the both of them, and he did it thoroughly, taking them each in turn several times over. There was no joint or seam on either Jazz or Soundwave that he didn't touch, grasping at and shoving fingers up underneath armor plating, relishing every anguished sound out of Jazz's mouth. Soundwave watched him close his massive denta over Jazz's neck and bite hard, he could see it so well this close... when did this happen, when did Megatron sandwich Jazz between the two of them like this, rubbing and grinding Jazz's body against Soundwave's in a way that should not have felt so good? Under assault from both Decepticons' surges now, Jazz clung to Soundwave and sobbed. Megatron *hmmmed* with pleasure in



response and thrust a few final times, before tipping over into his last overload. The current zapped Jazz hard, eliciting another scream, but was strong enough to reach even into Soundwave's joints, firing across his synapses with a snap of sizzling pleasure/pain.

Megatron groaned in satisfaction, and collapsed rather heavily on top of them both. Soundwave worried about Jazz's trapped vents, but after a few moments Megatron decided to resettle, closing one hand around Jazz's arm and yanking him away. He threw him well over to the other side of the berth before dropping back onto Soundwave's frame. Enthusiastically he kissed Soundwave again, and wearily Soundwave tried to respond.

"That was... magnificent, Soundwave. Don't you think? He hasn't lost his touch, and you were wonderfully obedient as always. I haven't enjoyed myself in the berth like this in ages. And I feel like it was a good learning experience, don't you? Helped to clear up any misunderstandings."

Soundwave tried to cough up some kind of answer, but Megatron didn't seem to need one. Already he was pushing himself up, and cupped a hand under Soundwave's shoulder to help him up as well. "And now I think you'd better get going; those clouds are only getting darker. I didn't mean to keep you here so long and I am sorry, I was just having such a good time." Gently he assisted Soundwave off the berth and onto his pedes, his arm around his shoulders holding him steady when Soundwave swayed. But Jazz- he turned back to the berth for his slave, and that arm tightened.

"Come along, you shouldn't delay. I don't want my Director of Intelligence and Surveillance getting caught in an acid shower." He was already steering Soundwave away from the berth, back to the doorway.

"Jazz -"

"Is fine where he is, no need to worry about him. You have so much work to do, you know, when this rain lifts it's going to be officially war."

Soundwave managed to look back and catch a glimpse of Jazz, crumpled and whimpering on Megatron's berth, hand reaching out toward him - wordlessly begging him not to leave him behind - before Megatron pulled him out of the berth chamber altogether.

"Megatron, Jazz mine."

"Of course he is. But I'll just... hold onto him, until this little problem with the seekers is taken care of. You can have him back when I have Starscream's head mounted on my wall. So make it happen, Soundwave. I know I can count on you."

He clapped his hand twice down on Soundwave's shoulder cuff, encouraging and supportive, right before leveraging that force to push him right out the front door. The door slammed shut, leaving him alone in the hall.

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## on revelations

He touched down and four symbiotes promptly fell upon him, biting, pecking, and punching to show their furious anxiety. In a simultaneous wave of verbal and telepathic communication they demanded to know why he was gone so long, why he shut down his side of the link, didn't he know they'd be so worried, and when when *when* could they go back to get Jazz?

"Can we go as soon as the rain's done?" Frenzy asked, from his place clinging to Soundwave's left arm.

"Can we come with you this time?" added Rumble from his right. Soundwave looked at their eager little faces and thought his spark might break all over again; he peeled each twin off and set them on the couch. Then he tried to pat their heads in preemptive comfort, but his hands were already shaking so hard he pulled away instead. Nobody in the room missed that. He watched their optics follow his hands, then swiftly exchange glances with one another.

"Boss?" asked the twins uneasily. Together they looked at Ravage, whose hackles were rising at a steady but eerily slow pace.

"Jazz-" He had to stop and reboot his vocalizer. "Jazz, now in temporary custody of Megatron until satisfactory victory over seekers achieved."

There. It was out, he'd said the words, and now he watched astonishment, understanding, and finally rage filter into their faces. He still didn't dare unlock his end of the symbiotic link for fear of what it might do to them.

"You mean he's taking Jazz *hostage*?" screeched Rumble. "Against *you*?"

"You're not his enemy! You're his best officer!"

"Where does he get off, treating you like this?"

"Megatron, always practical," Soundwave answered helplessly. "And Soundwave, aware of this possibility for some time."

Ever since the night of the riots, in fact. Again he looked at Ravage. Ever since that night when Megatron so 'generously' allowed him to keep Jazz after all. Why else let Soundwave keep what he wanted most, if not to take it away right when it suited Megatron? Soundwave had known that for a long time. But that didn't lessen the ache of betrayal deep in his chest. He'd never given anything less than his best to Megatron, never given him reason to doubt his loyalty. Megatron didn't have to take away Jazz for Soundwave to work his hardest in this new war; Soundwave would have done it anyway.

"Megatron wants decisive end to conflict with seekers," he told his cassettes. "And Soundwave must see to carrying this out. Must see to capture of Starscream."

Unless...

Somewhere inside him, a small voice whispered that he couldn't rely on Megatron's word.

Megatron might not give Jazz back after all. Or he might take him away again in the future, dangling him before Soundwave in exchange for some new task. Wouldn't it be better, nudged the voice, to not have to be afraid? If he were to turn on Megatron, join Starscream instead -

And that was it. Soundwave had just contemplated a disloyal thought, and already he could feel the cascading failures in his base operating code. Something wrenched painfully in his chest, and then systems crashed everywhere. Distantly he heard his symbiotes squawk from the pain, and the world went black.

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BIRDS FLYING HIGH, YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL. SUN IN THE SKY, YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL. REEDS DRIFTIN' ON BY... YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL.

Jazz was lying where he'd left him, crumpled and still. But then music drifted through the space between them and it seemed to wake him, or perhaps it was the other way around. Slowly, Jazz lifted his head and listened for a little while, then swiveled his body over to sit upright, in one neat and graceful motion. IT'S A NEW DAWN. IT'S A NEW DAY. IT'S A NEW LIFE, FOR ME. AND I'M FEELING GOOD.

The music crept up in volume and so did Jazz's smile, spreading across his face in a way that chilled Soundwave's spinal struts. Sinuously he unwound his body into a standing position, pedes already moving in small circles across the floor. FISH IN THE SEA, YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL.

RIVER RUNNING FREE, YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL. BLOSSOM ON THE TREE, YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL! IT'S A NEW DAWN, IT'S A NEW DAY, IT'S A NEW LIFE... FOR ME. AND I'M FEELING GOOD.

Jazz threw himself into the dance, adding leaps, spins, and crouches. DRAGONFLY OUT IN THE SUN; YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN, DON'T YOU KNOW IT. BUTTERFLIES ALL HAVIN' FUN, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. Around Soundwave he danced on this... where was he?

The surface under their pedes stretched smooth and flat, punctuated by huge structures that looked vaguely familiar to Soundwave but he couldn't place them. Blithely Jazz balanced his weight against one, then bounced away light as air. Without thinking, Soundwave followed. SLEEP IN PEACE WHEN THE DAY IS DONE, THAT'S WHAT I MEAN. AND THIS OLD WORLD IS A NEW WORLD! AND A BOLD WORLD... FOR ME.

They were on the hax set, he finally realized, and those structures around which Jazz danced so merrily were their own gamepieces. He and Jazz were... very small. Or the hax set had become gigantic. Did it matter? STARS WHEN YOU SHINE, YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL. SCENT OF THE PINE, YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL. OH FREEDOM IS MINE! AND I KNOW HOW I FEEL. IT'S A NEW DAWN, IT'S A NEW DAY, IT'S A NEW LIFE!

One by one the gamepieces burst into flame, throwing sparks up into the - into the night sky? Were they hax gamepieces, or the buildings in the city skyline? Jazz's dancing became all the more frantic as the volume built to crescendo, his movements sharp and clear against the fiery glow. And then he looked right at Soundwave, smiled, and altered his path to dance around him. IT'S A NEW DAWN, IT'S A NEW DAY, IT'S A NEW LIFE! Closer and closer, until Jazz's body was pressed right up against his, using him for balance when he arched backward and then curved back up to meet him, face pressed so close to his that Soundwave could swear he felt his ventilations. Certainly he felt that grin.

FOR ME... AND I'M FEELING GOOD.

Soundwave's systems surged back online and his optics flipped open, the real world coming back to him all in a rush. Start-up programs queued and spun out their ritual data, among them status checks for his symbiotes. Four of them fine and safely near; he wasted a few astrosecs casting desperately for Laserbeak before his cognition caught up and he remembered she was unconscious in the medbay. His vision calibrated and confirmed same; all four of his present cassettes were crouched over him, wide-opticked and staring at him in horror, along with a less-horrified but visibly more cranky Hook.

"Soundwave!" they all chorused at once, both verbal and mental. Little hands curled at the edges of his collar armor and shook him, or would have if any of them had the strength to move someone of his weight. "You're back! You're back, right? Don't you ever fragging scare us like that again!" A few punches drove home the point. "What the frag happened to you?"

"This, unknown." Dazed, Soundwave moved to sit up, only for Hook to press a hand against his chest and keep him right where he was. In his other hand he was holding a datapad, and scowling at its contents.

"Your spark seized," he explained tersely. "And all your systems shut down. All but one, which - by the way - is not supposed to happen. Your neural activity was off the charts when I got here." He tipped his hand to show Soundwave the screen; groggily Soundwave tried to focus on the small numbers. "These are your normal readouts in your telepathic state, but there was nobody here to get telepathic on."

Or was there? Soundwave usually needed very close proximity, he shouldn't have been able to read Jazz's thoughts from this far away, but then a lot of things had happened today - his core programming twinged again at the reminder - that shouldn't have. Again he pushed to sit up, brushing aside Hook's hand when he tried to stop him.

"Hook's care gratefully received. Now, dismissed."

An immediate wave of protests was the prompt response, from Ravage's unhappy growl all the way up to Rumble and Frenzy's emphatic denials. "Hey, whoa! You ain't even close to dismissed."

"He is not dismissed!"

"You don't even know what happened to you, or why!"

"And you, doc, you're just going to walk away after diagnosing him with a shrug?"

"What do you want from me?" Hook shot back, looking not a little exasperated. "If his body isn't broken, there's nothing for me to fix. I am a frame surgeon, not a neural software specialist."

But he was still a medic, down to his own base programming, and unhappily he looked from Soundwave to the ominous sky outside. "But they're right that we should at least know why. The best thing to do would be to come back to the Constructicon medbay with me and have Perceptor take a look at you. He'll be the closest thing to what you need in the city."

"Examination unnecessary," Soundwave said dismissively, currently preoccupied with using the couch to haul himself to standing. "Other priorities currently demand attention."

"Such as what, standing by the window to stare at the rain?"

"Hook, dismissed. Now."

This time he quelled all the forthcoming protests with a single, silent command that had them all snapping their mouths shut at once. Hook looked at the cassettes, then back to him, and very wisely gave up the fight. He bowed his head. "Yes sir. I'll see myself out."

"This, not a possibility. Alarms not navigable for outsider. Rumble, escort Hook to exit." He didn't wait, and before they were even out the door he was stumbling across the room to the hax table. The world still felt unsteady and he braced his hands against its corners to keep upright, staring intently at the familiar layout below.

"Uh, boss?" Frenzy crept into the corner of his vision, poking him cautiously on one arm. "I don't mean to rush you, or make things sound worse than they are. But things are really really bad right now. Half the city's defecting to the seekers; we're headed into a new war that we have to win or we don't ever get Jazz back. And oh yeah, you just *collapsed with a stopped spark and we have no fragging idea why*. Now is not the time to play hax!"

Soundwave ignored him. Stiffly he moved aside and, for the first time ever, sat down on Jazz's side of the table. Soundwave had looked at this hax set almost every day for a year, but now he saw the game like new. Suddenly it was very... clear to Soundwave, in a way that hadn't been before. He saw how Jazz liked to arrange his gamepieces across the board, forcing Soundwave's tokens to crowd each other, colliding and fighting each other for space.

"Boss!" Impatiently Frenzy knocked one of them aside and it skittered off the board. "Are you listening to me? Seekers! War! It's important!"

"No," he said firmly, "it isn't." He raised his hand against any argument before Frenzy could open his mouth again.

*...tricked the three of them into hating each other*

The Decepticon army that killed Prime and defeated the Autobots was strong, fierce, and united. But look what had happened to them in the years since. The Combaticons were missing in action. The Insecticons were dead. The triplechangers disgraced and defected, and the seekers...

Soundwave was feeling better now, not so dizzy. It was easier for him to stand and move into his office, where he ordered his personal console to replay Laserbeak's battle footage. All over again he watched it: Starscream and Bombshell dropping their weapons, speaking to one another on casual terms, Starscream shooting him in the back at the first chance.

"What's goin' on?" he heard Rumble ask, not very quietly, when he returned.

"Boss is in the zone," Frenzy whispered back. "Or he's flipped out. Not sure which."

Laserbeak had caught Starscream in the act of treason, and none of them thought twice about it after the fact because every Decepticon knew that it was exactly the sort of thing Starscream would do.

This scene was the perfect picture to match expectations, and that's what bothered Soundwave.

Had been quietly bothering him since the day he saw it, actually, not that he'd had hardly a moment to stop and think about it since. It was just so... *perfect*.

But what was the implication of a thought like that? That someone meant for her to see it? Certainly not Starscream, who'd nearly died for his treason - barely got out with his life, in fact. If he knew what Laserbeak might have caught on her tapes, it's strange that he wasn't prepared to react faster before Megatron attacked him. Carefully Soundwave re-examined his own memories of that day. Was Starscream looking so surprised to be caught, or just surprised? Surprised as the rest of them? What if it never really happened at all? Could Laserbeak see something other than truth?

Laserbeak, like all cassette models, had extremely advanced optics. They were not easily fooled. The only tech Soundwave knew of that had ever successfully tricked her visual receptors was Hound's holographic projector, and Hound was -

Soundwave's hand closed over the back of his own chair and threw it straight into the nearest wall.

---

Soundwave was a mild, even-mannered mech. His protocols were rational, emotional reactions rare, and outbursts unheard of. But for just a moment, that night, the quiet and logical Director of Communications succumbed to the worst rage he'd ever known. Understanding had come too suddenly and now it was all too much: the betrayal, hurt, and utter *humiliation* of being played for such a fool. He lost himself to fury, silently screaming it to the world.

And then his protocols fell back into place, reasserting order, and the moment passed. Soundwave came back to himself, still standing with fists clenched, his mangled chair in the corner and four terrified, bewildered cassettes staring at him. One look at them and remorse promptly flooded all else; he had frightened them, he shouldn't have done it, and now he must explain.

"Jazz," he finally managed, "... attempting to escape."

He had to force the word out, cringed to hear it, and mentally braced himself for the reaction. It was not, however, the four-fold echo of rage that he was expecting. Instead, they exchanged sideways nervous looks and shuffled their pedes.

"Soundwave, you've had a hard day. I think maybe we should take Hook up on that offer to visit the medbay. We can wait out the rain there -"

"Time for that, nonexistent! Jazz, trying to escape." Why wasn't anyone picking up on his urgency, why were they all *looking* at him like that? Instead of leaping to action they were swapping rapid comm signals, and keeping their end of the symbiotic link muted from his touch.

"Soundwave," Frenzy said slowly, almost delicately, "Jazz is with Megatron right now. You left him there. Remember?"

"Jazz's current location well known to me," Soundwave snapped, then hesitated. Was it really? Quietly he sent a quick tap to the tracker on Jazz's collar, and confirmed that yes he was still in Decepticon Headquarters. "This, however, does not alter truth. Jazz, still trying to escape." He pointed to the screen, still replaying the so-called treachery on constant loop. "This, not real. Starscream, innocent!"

The expressions on their faces promptly went from worry to outright alarm, and Rumble stepped forward with hands raised. "Okay, Soundwave, now you're just talking crazy. And you need to lie down now."

"Silence," Soundwave ordered tersely. "Laserbeak, recorded scene prepared by Autobots. Rumble saw Sideswipe in jungle during battle; Sideswipe there to guard Hound. This sequence, nothing but false hologram designed to frame Starscream and force seekers from Iacon. This, reason Jazz told Combaticons to steal Hound from Earth."

“Okay boss, back up. Jazz did not *tell* the Combaticons to steal Hound. He made a joke, they took it literally. It was their idea!”

“Combaticons think idea was theirs,” Soundwave corrected. The twins huffed; Buzzsaw had already turned his beak up at the idea that Laserbeak could fall for such a trick anyway.

“And even if you were right, even if he really did and this really is fake, how could Hound be on Earth running free instead of out in space with the Combaticons?”

For the first time Soundwave hesitated, and they nodded. “See? It’s impossible. I think you’re just... letting your imagination run wild.”

“Never thought we’d be saying *that* to you.”

“Jazz must be communicating orders,” Soundwave realized.

“Wh- how?”

“To who?”

“Mirage. Sideswipe. Cosmos. All of them. Combaticons no doubt ambushed after flight from Earth; possibly now dead. And Hound, returned to Earth for this purpose.”

But how? Nothing happens without communication, something Soundwave knew better than anyone. It was for that exact reason that he insisted all slaves have their comlinks disabled in the first place.

Rumble was talking again, which Soundwave ignored as he bent over his console once more.

Hands flew across the keys, casting for his monitor footage. Since he archived in reverse chronological order, the first opportunity he found was the file for his own office, the day Starcream and Megatron nearly killed each other at headquarters. Jazz had pulled Perceptor and Bluestreak into his private office, and Soundwave had been so annoyed. Annoyed, but not really *angry*, not threatened - not after everything else that just happened. As soon as they were gone, he’d put it right out of his mind.

“Rumble, repeat everything Autobots said after escape from command room.”

“I already told you, Soundwave, the other bots didn’t say a thing to him. He tried, asked if they were hurt. They wouldn’t even answer him.”

It seemed valid. On the screen Soundwave watched Jazz kneel before the huddled Perceptor, speak to him, try to reach for his hand. The Autobot, however, pulled his hand away in disgust. Jazz huffed and grabbed Bluestreak’s hand instead, who did not look anymore receptive than the other.

But under Soundwave’s careful watch, after a few astroseconds had passed, a fresh light kindled in those blue optics. His lips turned up in that unfamiliar curve of a smile, and for the most fleeting of moments, there was such joyful hope in his face that he seemed a different bot altogether.

In the next second he became aware of himself and hastily tucked his head between his knees, hiding the smile away. But Soundwave saw it. Soundwave knew he saw it. Jazz said *something* to make him look like that, he just didn’t know how yet. Could he have found a way to access his comms again? Hook would have surely seen it -

Again Soundwave replayed the clip, watching Jazz this time instead of the other one. Was that just the slightest motion in his shoulder joint? Soundwave’s gaze traveled to their linked hands. Was Jazz... squeezing Bluestreak’s hand, just a little? He magnified the zoom to the camera’s maximum

yield, focusing now just on the hands. Yes, Soundwave was sure Jazz was contracting his hand's hydraulics, in and out, just syncopated enough to indicate a pattern. Jazz wasn't using signals at all - he was transmitting code through physical touch. Which was *beyond* archaic. It was, however, working.

"Here." Soundwave replayed the file again, pointing. "Jazz, found way to communicate."

"He's... holding the bot's hand."

"No, using pressure to converse in code. Cassettes, not able to see?"

Going by the blank stares, they couldn't. "This, explains much," he added. "Early on forbid Jazz from physical contact with other Autobots. He pleaded exception for only holding hands, claimed it for reasons of platonic comfort. On eve of party, he persuaded Laserbeak to vacate his shoulder and supervise from above."

Miserably Soundwave recounted how many Autobots in that room Jazz had clasped hands with, while Laserbeak watched unaware. She would have sensed the vibrations in his arm without question. "Jazz, sharing plans -"

"Soundwave, it's *just holding hands*," Frenzy broke in, voice strained to the edge. "Now please, drop it already!"

The vehemence behind the words startled Soundwave, so caught up in unraveling Jazz's lies. But now he finally took note, not just of the disbelief but the rising frustration and unhappiness among his cassettes. They couldn't see the truth - they didn't *want* to see the truth. Jazz stopped being an Autobot slave in this house a long time ago; Jazz was part of the family. Jazz was *theirs*. And what belonged to Soundwave did not betray their own.

Helplessly Soundwave looked to Ravage, his proud and stubborn symbiote, who only just last orn had finally allowed Jazz into the fold. Full of indecision and uncertainty, Ravage stared right back. Ravage did not give trust easily, and when he did it was not easily taken back.

"This revelation, distressing," Soundwave sympathized. "Acknowledgement given. But cassettes must understand: Jazz wants to escape."

"That's a lie!" Frenzy shouted. Angrily his pede clanged against the floor. "Jazz is happy here, Jazz loves us! He loves you! We have movie night, we play games... he would never leave us. He-he wouldn't!"

"Frenzy, his thoughts witnessed."

"Thought you said you couldn't understand Jazz's thoughts. You said they were all coded in music."

"Affirmative. The words, nonsense." Birds and fish, reeds... it was all incomprehensible to Soundwave. But for once he knew what it meant anyway, knew it to the core of his spark. "But this time Soundwave confident of meaning. Jazz wants freedom."

"It's *not true*!"

Frenzy snarled and tore out of the room, followed close on his heels by Rumble. Soundwave cycled a small sigh, swallowed back the pain, and looked again to his monitor. Frenzy's mention of the word 'code' reminded him that the job was only half done, he had only discovered the method and not the message. Archaic transmission or not, Soundwave was looking at an enemy communication



and it was his job to decrypt it. How to even begin? Jazz might have invented any number of clever codes, using any of his languages -

Then he realized he was overthinking it. Jazz's contact with most slaves since the end of the war was sporadic at best, and in those cases like Chromia or Sunstreaker fairly nonexistent. Teaching a new code would have been impossible. He had to be using this handholding technique with an old one, something that any Autobot would understand. Squinting carefully, Soundwave recorded the pattern of what little his camera had caught, then called up his decryption programs. Soundwave had cracked more Autobot codes than most Autobots even knew existed, cracked enough of them to help win this war. He'd probably cracked this one too.

*"If master correct," Buzzsaw pointed out quietly, "this method, insufficient. Master, restricted Jazz from Autobot contact for too long. Such sparse communication incapable of coordinating complex strategy."*

He was trying, in his own logical way, to talk Soundwave down. Soundwave knew it, and he didn't need to reach out and feel to also know that Buzzsaw was harboring a small private relief that Laserbeak was not awake and present to hear all this. She would have been crushed to hear Soundwave. He knew that, but it didn't make him any less right.

Soundwave turned away from his console, leaving his program to do its work, and followed in the footsteps of his two symbiotes. Out in the common room, Rumble had caught up with Frenzy by the balcony doors, arms thrown over his twin's shoulders, holding on to give what comfort he could. Outside, rain had finally begun to drip from the sky, landing in fat sizzling drops on the balcony.

"Remember the last time it rained?" Frenzy muttered. "He told off Starscream so good that day. Defended you like he was really one of us."

"This, remembered."

"He's part of the team, Soundwave. More part of our team than any of those slaggin' Autobots. How could you think he would ever betray you?"

"This realization, not wanted. But truth cannot be avoided." Soundwave considered that and added, "Any longer."

"You have video of Starscream killing an Insecticon, and Jazz holding hands with an Autobot, and you call it 'truth'," Frenzy countered bitterly. "Have you already forgotten everything he's done for us since he came here?"

"No. But expectation, those acts: subverting Starscream, subverting Shockwave, served Jazz's ends as well."

"I am *talking*," Frenzy almost shouted, exasperatedly, "about the *cassettibots*. Cuz, you know, no one else ever will. This place was as dead as they were. *You* were dead inside. And he fixed it, Jazz fixed it!"

Soundwave flinched at the word, and felt the familiar ache in his spark, but that's all it was: an old ache that throbbed gently when reminded of its existence. There was a time, which seemed very long ago now, that Soundwave would have buckled at such words, the pain so raw he could barely stand it.

"Jazz," he said slowly, "always saying that fate of cassettibots, not my fault. This, perhaps, only truthful thing he ever told me." Carefully but firmly he folded the ache and set it aside. "But that

does not change what he wants to do, and that I must stop him.”

“Stop what, Soundwave?” Rumble asked wearily. “Some grand plan tricking Cons into stealing Bots to trick Cons, all masterminded by someone you only let out of the house once a megacycle? It’s just not possible.”

No, some logical quadrant in his processor conceded. It just wasn’t. It was a mad idea to begin with, and depended on so many variables. Such a plot could never be executed without constant coordination - Jazz was lucky to see another Autobot for even a tenth of the time needed.

Soundwave acknowledged that reality, but something didn’t sit right with Rumble’s choice of words. Soundwave had cut off his access to the slaves, and rightly so, but it was hardly true to say he never let him *out*. Hardly a cycle had passed since the day Hook gave the order that Soundwave hadn’t taken him on a walk. Jazz enjoyed them so much...

Without speaking, Soundwave turned a fraction away from the twins, angling toward the room’s corner. Jazz’s corner, they all considered it now. All the cassettes had left it alone since the day he arrived, not that there was much to really mark it as ‘his’. Just his precious datapad sitting on the windowsill, surrounded by a handful of gamecards. At that, Soundwave’s processor slowed and stalled.

Needed it to keep himself busy, he said. Begged Soundwave for the privilege of keeping one. And ever since, Soundwave had taken hundreds of walks through the market with Jazz, bought him new gamecards nearly every trip. There should be mountains of them, not this small stack that was, he realized upon picking one up, covered in dust. He dropped it and took the datapad itself, then twisted and yanked with enough pressure to crack it neatly open right down the middle. Inside, the wires had been plucked from their ports and rigged to allow for re-write instead of read-only. Every gamecard Soundwave ever gave him had gone in here and been written over with Jazz’s plans, detailed instructions, timetables, everything he needed. And then he’d dropped them on their next walk, who knows where, anyplace in the city that another Autobot could find them and pass them on. Maybe not even an Autobot. Any poor beggar would be only too willing to ferry a datachip in exchange for fuel, no questions asked.

It only took a second for the entire sequence to fall into place, after which he looked up to see his cassettes’ astonished stares, all their optics fixed on the doctored datapad in his hands. Shock, disbelief, and finally, understanding filtered into the link, and Soundwave hurt to see the expressions on their faces. They had *trusted* Jazz.

He activated his vocalizer to say something, though he didn’t know what, but was cut off when his console beeped somewhere behind him. His program had finished running; the code had been identified and Jazz’s message decrypted. Simultaneously, in total silence, all of them looked to the doorway, to the screen beyond displaying whatever words Jazz had relayed to Bluestreak that day. At his pedes, Rumble let out of a very small “oh slag.”

AUTOBOTS ROLL OUT.

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whoa

## on point

*“Constructicon Scrapper, acknowledge.”*

*“Constructicon Hook, acknowledge.”*

*“Constructicon Long Haul, acknowledge.”*

*“Constructicon Mixmaster, acknowledge.”*

*“Constructicon Bonecrusher, acknowledge.”*

*“Constructicon Scavenger, acknowledge.”*

For the second time Soundwave cycled through the designations, a little more anxious with every passing unanswered hail. *“Any Constructicon, respond. Now. Classification: highest urgency.”*

Still nothing. Rain could interfere with comm signals, he knew, but it really hadn’t begun to rain yet - just intermittent drops leaking from the sky now and then, an ominous prelude to what was coming.

“Still nothing?” Frenzy asked, doing his own best with the console’s equipment. “Cuz, same here.”

“Why Scrapper’s team, though?” Rumble pressed. “Why be more worried for them when they’re the only gestalt on Cybertron? They’re stronger than anyone else in the city.”

“Constructicons, also a target,” Soundwave explained, never pausing in his repeated hails. “Their team already has custody of slaves Grapple, Hoist, Windcharger, and First Aid. Since recent upheaval, also has temporary custody of traitors’ slaves Perceptor, Groove, Fireflight, and Bumblebee. Since previous two cycles, also has Megatron’s injured slaves Sunstreaker and Bluestreak in their medbay. With exception of Jazz and Chromia, Constructicons now housing every Autobot on Cybertron. Autobots, almost double the number of Decepticons under that roof.”

His cassettes stared as he spoke, optics turning paler by the astrosecond. “And, as stated, Devastator only gestalt mech in city. Autobots have strong incentive to destroy that gestalt, by eliminating all or at least one of the Constructicons.”

“And, um.” Rumble cleared his throat nervously. “Do you think they’re not answering because of the rain?”

“Perhaps.” Soundwave finished his fifth attempt at reaching the Constructicons, and looked back to his balcony doors. “Perhaps not. For this uncertainty, I should go there directly.” Acid was dripping from the sky, yes, but Soundwave was big and built with thick armor. His thrusters were fast enough that he’d get to their complex with minimal damage. “However...”

“However?” they all chorused, verbal or not. Again Soundwave’s gaze fell back on the hax table.

“Concern, justifiable for Decepticon Command. In Jazz’s thoughts, large fires seen. Suspicion: Jazz arranged for explosives under key buildings. Headquarters, the obvious target. And Jazz... must be seen to.”

They all exchanged looks. “You said he’s still inside it.”

“Affirmative.” Warily Soundwave thought about how he’d spent so much time locking down his home in the most secure, escape-proof building in the city, only for Jazz to no longer be inside it.

Megatron didn’t even bother to keep guards. “This, however, does not guarantee my knowledge of his current actions.”

“Are you gonna try to hail Megatron?”

Briefly Soundwave shuttered his optics. If he did, and Megatron did answer, what would he say?

What could he say? The real question Rumble was asking was *will you finally tell Megatron the truth?*

Soundwave’s optics flipped on and he made for the doors in long, swift strides. Rain was coming faster; no more time to delay. “Time for departure, now.”

“Wait, Soundwave!”

Impatiently Soundwave looked to Frenzy, who suddenly looked very small and fragile. For some reason he was suddenly reminded of that moment he’d found Frenzy in headquarters, shellshocked for having blabbed the truth to Jazz. “What will you do to him? Will you kill him?”

He only barely considered the answer. “Negative.”

“Even if -”

“Jazz, mine,” he reminded his other possessions. “Whether he understands it or not. And I do not let go what is mine.”

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The smart, logical thing to do was to fly directly to the Constructicons’ complex. There he could personally warn the gestalt, ensure the slaves were properly restrained, and hail Shockwave to see to his own property. And then, finally then, he could hail Megatron, by which time he’d have figured out what to say.

All of that was the smart thing to do, and perhaps Soundwave should have done that, but instead here he was touching down in the doorway of Decepticon Command, just nanokliks after the uneven drips turned into full rain pelting from the sky. Soundwave stumbled through the doors, pockmarks of acid sizzling all over his armor, subdermal sensors lit up in agony. He grasped at the drying cloth in his subspace and wiped it rapidly across the plating, which did nothing to help the pain, but could at least keep the acid from etching deeper into him. Primus, it *burned*.

Soundwave took a moment to lean against the wall, forcing himself through several deep vent cycles, accessing each pain sensor and switching off its input. When he could take a step without collapsing, he pushed away and made for his office, where he had superior comms equipment. And this office was even closer to the Constructicons, so maybe...

No response. Soundwave swallowed back his dread and recorded the warning instead, dropping it into their general inbox and flagging it with the highest urgency marker available. That accomplished, he left his office and made for the central lift. He was the only thing moving, the hallways stretching empty and silent around him. Since the end of the war it would have been

standard practice to release most headquarters staff to go home for a rainstorm, but a skeleton crew should be here, guarding the entrance, monitoring the consoles, keeping an optic on things. With all the mass desertions bleeding out their government, they just didn't have the mecha anymore. Everything had crumbled so fast.

Soundwave called up the lift, entered, and out of habit rode it straight to the top level of the building. But once he'd stepped in front of Megatron's door, that's where mind and body came to a screeching halt. Anything might be happening on the other side of that door. Maybe Jazz was asleep on Megatron's floor, maybe he wasn't. But he was *here*, according to his tracker, and he was with Megatron, and what was Soundwave supposed to say to Megatron when he pressed that keylock? The truth? The truth was all Soundwave ever wanted to tell, but the truth would get Jazz murdered on the spot.

Helplessly Soundwave backed away from Megatron's door, back into the lift. Maybe he couldn't confront Megatron just yet, but there was still that concern of explosives. That he could confront, and would. Down went the lift again, down past the first floor, down into a place that most civilians didn't even know still existed: the subterranean levels.

It was cheaper, Scrapper had explained, to just clear away the debris of the old ruined Council building. There was no point in demolishing their mostly intact basements, it would only cost them in time and weaken the foundation besides. And so Megatron's shiny modern headquarters was built on top of the governing capitol he had so violently replaced. A mech would have an easier time going unnoticed, placing hypothetical bombs down there than on the ground floor in full view.

The doors slid apart, and Soundwave stepped into the past. Here the corridors were not lined with shiny brushed steel, but older, darker metals that had oxidized with the centuries. The air was musty and stale against his sensors. What should he even look for? All over again he wished he could open a channel to one of the Constructicons; Soundwave didn't know much about demolition or building stress points. But he did know what explosives look like. He would know if something down here did not belong. The halls were lit - barely - by old security track lighting running along their upper edges. He dialed up his optical input and moved deeper into the darkness.

Hardly had Soundwave taken five steps when he hesitated, one pede just over the floor. Was that... music? Promptly he increased his audio gain to maximum, and this time he was sure. There was music, human music, echoing thinly from somewhere in the black. Soundwave checked Jazz's tracker again, and yes it claimed to be in headquarters. Which, technically, was still true - just very, very far below where he should be. Soundwave unspaced his blaster and finished setting his pede down on the grating. He did this as softly as he possibly could, taking extreme care, but Soundwave could not move silently like Jazz. Jazz, whose hearing was every bit as good as his own, if not better. The music switched off, and Soundwave knew he'd been heard.

He eased the blaster into firing mode and covered the rest of the distance smoothly and quickly. The hall turned a corner and terminated into a thick security door, well and firmly locked. Soundwave swept the space from end to end, and found nothing. But he didn't imagine that music; Soundwave was not *capable* of imagining music. He cycled through another quiet vent, spark spinning so loud in his chest it seemed he could hear nothing else. Jazz was here. Soundwave knew it, knew it as well as he knew anything about his slave. And because he knew him so well, he knew where to find him too. Cautiously, ever so slowly, Soundwave backed up until his heel tapped the wall behind him. Abruptly his face snapped upward, gun tracking toward the ceiling in the same moment.

Jazz was already there, hanging by his knees from some pipework, grinning that upside down grin, blaster pointed straight at Soundwave's visor. "Now what's a classy mech like yourself," he drawled, "doin' in a pit like this?"

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They stayed there a long time, one standing, one dangling, weapons pointed at one another in mutual threat. Soundwave said nothing, so eventually Jazz filled in the silence himself. “How are ya, my love?”

Unconsciously Soundwave stiffened. Jazz had not called him that since the night of Shockwave’s party. Still struggling to tamp down his frantic spark, Soundwave activated his own vocalizer and made sure it sounded equally indifferent.

“Jazz, should not be here.”

“Damn straight I shouldn’t be here. But then, you’re the one that walked out and left me behind. Remember?” Sinuously he began the process of unwinding himself from his perch and back to the floor, blaster never once moving off Soundwave. Something bulky was strapped to his back, Soundwave noted warily, and wondered if it was another weapon or some explosives. “Did you change your mind? Did you come back to rescue me from Megatron?”

“Soundwave, here to stop you.”

“Oh? From what?”

“Pretending, unnecessary. All of it known: your communication with other slaves through hands, your modified datapad. Hound’s illusion. Your plans, discovered. Also, finished.”

He’d hoped at least one of those would wipe that smile off Jazz’s face, but he got nothing more than a faint flicker across the visor. “You’ve been busy tonight,” he murmured, sounding impressed. “Now I know why you look so mad. You think I’m trying to engineer some mass escape for the Autobots, get us all out of the city. But you’re wrong, Soundwave, you’ve got it all wrong.” He paused and added, “That’s Prowl’s job.”

Soundwave didn’t let himself show a reaction, tempting though it was to squeeze his trigger right then and there. Jazz waited long enough to realize Soundwave wasn’t going to speak, then kept going. “Me, I’m just here to sabotage the Decepticon Empire. Wasn’t enough to escape, you see, the Cons had us outnumbered and on the run before. They could do it again. So I had to break this government apart from the inside, turn them all against each other until there was no one left to give chase. It’s how I did it before. It’s how I did it again.”

“Wrong,” Soundwave said flatly. “Jazz, unsuccessful. Drop possessions and return with me now to Megatron. Prowl, and other Autobots’ survival, will be reported to him. Other portions can be omitted, to reduce chance of Megatron killing you.”

“Still worrying over my welfare, love? That’s touching, if inconsistent.” Jazz leaned forward just slightly, sinister gleam in the visor. “I should thank you, you know. Because I must confess, there were some nights you almost had me going with that whole ‘Soundwave yours’ thing. I actually wondered if I’d be able to walk away when the time came. But then you turned your back on me, left me lying on Megatron’s berth, and suddenly I had no trouble remembering what I am. What you are. And there was never a happy ending in the cards for us, no matter how hard you and the kids were wishing for it. Specially this little one right here.”

Under his arm he shifted his mysterious bag forward, allowing it to tip open just enough for Soundwave to see the unconscious Laserbeak inside. And if Soundwave thought his spark was racing before, it was nothing compared to the sheer panic that engulfed it now. Carrier protocols surged from dormant to overwhelming all motor functions in less than an astrosec, consuming every conscious thought and demanding to *protect his symbiote now now now*. He was already moving forward before he realized it, but promptly froze when Jazz tapped a medical scalpel on her helpless head.

“Uh-uh, that’s close enough.”

“How -”

“Aid knows all the ways out of Constructicon medbay,” Jazz reminded him, the edge of the blade sweeping around underneath her beak to rest against her throat. He did this without taking his gaze off Soundwave for a second. “And I was just paranoid enough to be prepared.”

“Jazz bluffing,” Soundwave snapped. “Jazz, not able to harm Laserbeak.”

“Please, Soundwave. Who do you think gave Hound the order to whack her on the head with a tree in the first place? Laserbeak was my precious messenger, but I couldn’t have her spilling her footage to you too soon. You’d have too much time to think about it. Though I *really* didn’t expect her to wake up and insist on playing it right there in front of everyone, Megatron and Starscream included. It was too delicious for words. She played her part fabulously.”

He kept on stroking her while he spoke, the motions so familiar and intimate that Soundwave couldn’t stand to watch it. He lifted one pede, subconsciously tempted to rush forward, and without so much as a seconds’ hesitation Jazz sliced off one of her wing platelets. Had she been awake, she would have screamed from the pain, and reflexively Soundwave flinched from the imagined echo of it.

“After a year of brushing these wings,” Jazz said, his voice a little harder this time, “believe me when I say I know every one of her vulnerable joints by spark. And I’ll cut into each of them if I have to, I’ll take her apart and mail the pieces back to you if that’s how you want to play it. I’ll do it, and not lose a wink of my next recharge, because right now you are the *only* thing standing between me and my freedom. Don’t test me, Soundwave. Don’t let another cassette die on your watch.”

The words were so cruel that Soundwave nearly faltered, and Jazz didn’t miss the way his blaster trembled in his grip. “That’s right, it’s not worth it. Go on, drop it now.” In a twisted echo of what happened on Earth, Soundwave obeyed, allowing the small blaster to drop from his hands to the floor. “Kick it away, there’s a good mech.”

“Jazz should not be capable of making such a threat.”

“I told you before, Soundwave, I am not the nice Autobot. I am the one who gets things done. Speaking of which, I need to get back on schedule. I didn’t want you here, but since you are, you can help. I’m looking for something... about yea big, sparkly, last seen in the custody of one Optimus Prime? Care to lead me to it?”

“Jazz, stated disbelief in Matrix.”

“Actually,” Jazz corrected, “what I said was that I only believe in what I see with my own optics. And baby, I have seen that Primus-cursed chunk of glass do amazing things. It belongs to the Autobots, not Megatron, but I know he has it. He’s the only one that could have gotten to Prime after that fireball. He may not talk about it, may not show it off like his other trophies, but he’s got it.

Aid thinks so too. I figure it's hidden down here, where he can burn himself trying and failing to use it in private. Go on, open that up and we'll go get it."

Jazz tilted his head toward the door, but Soundwave didn't move. "Soundwave, not in possession of key."

"Let's not waste time on your truth semantics, darling. Maybe you don't know this lock, but you do know Megatron's security system. You know his codes, you know everything about how he keeps his house. So you can and will figure out how to open this door." Jazz circled back deeper into the corridor, putting Soundwave between the door and his gun. "Come now. You know I can aim very well with this, and you really don't want to lie here in the dark, crippled and wondering if there'll even be a Decepticon medic to fix you when this is all over."

Soundwave didn't like that implication about the Constructicons, but right now he was concentrating more on his own circumstances. The sonic rifle on his shoulder was poorly suited to cramped quarters like this; a blast would bring down the walls and roof as well as Jazz, and the odds of Laserbeak getting badly injured were too great. And he couldn't call for help; his own comms were useless so far down here, rain interference or not. But Soundwave had other aces that Jazz hadn't considered, like that collar around his neck. He could trigger the shock punishment at any time, but not now, not with that scalpel pressed so close to Laserbeak's fuel lines. Better to go along for now, bide his time, and wait for Jazz to relax. Let him waste time on a treasure hunt, while Soundwave formulated counterstrategy.

"I'm waiting," Jazz prompted, but still Soundwave did not move.

"State actions taken against Megatron."

"Taken against..." Jazz repeated incredulously. "It's what he did to *me* tonight, remember? And to you too! And you're still worried about him, unbelievable. Baby, there's loyalty and then there's just masochism."

"Megatron, my leader, and only first of two that have betrayed me tonight," Soundwave said, voice clipped and cold. "Jazz may recall that Soundwave often answered Jazz's questions, though never required to."

Jazz actually considered that, visor glinting thoughtfully in the dim light, and finally answered. "I haven't done a thing to Megatron. You know how hard he recharges after a good long frag; he's just sleeping. Course, that'll change before the end of the night."

"I will stop you," Soundwave informed Jazz.

"Sure you will. Now move."

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It took Soundwave just three tries to finish Jazz's decryption on the lock code, and they traveled deeper into the old capitol's halls. At first they walked in silence, but it wasn't long before Soundwave heard Jazz humming softly under his ventilations, and then eventually went back to playing music from his speakers again. Every now and then he would break into one of his little trademark *hop-skips*.



“Jazz should not be so quick to celebrate,” he remarked acidly. “Must be aware of high probability of failure in this plan.”

“Shh, d’ya hear that, love?” was the response. “The roar of seeker engines closing in, here to back you up? No? How about the clitter clatter of Insecticons coming to your rescue, or at least a Combaticon or two? No, you don’t hear any of that, because I’ve spent the last six years Yoko-ing your Beatles while no one was looking. I am very aware of my chances, thank you, and I like them a lot.”

Soundwave fumed, and had to bury the urge to strike at Jazz. He was keeping to behind Soundwave, not letting him see Laserbeak, and knew Soundwave’s range well enough to stay out of reach. Jazz relied on the tempers of his opponents, he reminded himself; he must stay calm. Jazz also, he knew well enough, did love a good brag and could never resist an audience.

“Jazz, also engineered Insecticon attack?”

“Oh, those poor confused bugs,” Jazz said gleefully. “They were getting orders from Megatron, or so they thought, to attack that human city. Then again for the refinery in the jungle. When the rest of the Decepticons showed up for a fight, what else could they think but that Megatron had decided to turn on them and kill them off? So they fought to their bitter end.”

“And Combaticons?”

“Let’s just say they really didn’t have it in their spark to put up much fight when they got ambushed on Chaar. Maybe it was losing Onslaught. Maybe it was spending all those years getting treated like Megatron’s garbage. Who can say? See, that’s most of the trick to what I do, Soundwave. I didn’t make Megatron kick around that gestalt, I didn’t tell Shockwave to underpay the lawkeepers or redtape the economy to death. And I didn’t tell a city full of mecha to start looking to Starscream when he did. The only reason for the failure of the Decepticon Empire is the Decepticons. I just... gave a nudge.”

“Or camera.”

“Or a camera,” Jazz acknowledged.

“Jazz, stole it from my inventory.”

“Absolutely stole it, right in front of all you. How many of them, was I juggling that day? Poor Rumble and Frenzy, they just couldn’t keep count. And you, you were so busy watching the one in my right hand, you never saw the one in my left. I just held onto it, and passed it off to Perceptor next time I saw him at headquarters. Told him to hide it somewhere in Starscream’s rooms... sure took him long enough to notice it.” He clucked his glossa sympathetically. “You were right to cut me off from the other Autobots after all, it’s just too bad for you that you didn’t do it sooner. That turned into a hell of a day, didn’t it? Ooh, remember how your team helped me nearly bring down the government in just one afternoon?”

“This much remembered,” Soundwave said frostily, “Megatron struck me, in public, and devastated cassettes by confiscating Jazz.”

He glanced back over his shoulder and was rewarded with the sight of a flash of guilt across that face.

“Optics forward, love. For what it’s worth, I did not enjoy watching you get in trouble for that. It was my *hope* that it would be enough to kickstart Starscream into a rebellion, but sadly he backed

down. Still, Megatron made the tactical mistake of punishing you through me, and once that was done, I knew you'd do anything to get me back - including killing Shockwave's career. That should have destroyed the empire too, he runs so damn much of it, but no. You had to step up and fix it: taking on his duties, actually trying to help him get back in Megatron's good graces, right up to and including that stupid party. You were always," he interrupted himself with a small sigh, "different."

They'd reached the first flight of stairs. Soundwave descended the first steps to the landing, where they turned back on themselves, and used the chance to check on Laserbeak. She was still nestled in Jazz's arm, scalpel tucked neatly under her beak.

"Explain."

"The other Cons, I could always count on them to get mad, fight back, hold a grudge. Their pettiness was my weapon. But not you. As long as you had me and you had your kids, you were always ready to put the argument aside, do what was best for the empire. You set out to clean the messes I'd worked so hard to smear across the landscape. Annoying habit, that."

He waited until Soundwave had completely cleared the stairs before vaulting over the rail and dropping several steps at once. "You were so good at it, in fact, that there were times that I really thought you were onto me. The things you said every now and then... sideways looks at me out of your visor. I was so sure that you'd figured me out. But then you'd do nothing." He shrugged, keeping his distance when Soundwave stopped at the next level security barrier. "Blinded by love?"

"Assertion incorrect," Soundwave denied, hand stopping just over the keypad. "Soundwave, aware of circumstantial evidence, drawing some conclusions. Always watching Jazz very carefully."

"Not carefully enough to see me dropping gamecards all over the city. Or into that human's lap."

"But enough to discover Jazz's former status as slave. To learn how you escaped it. Enough to gather early estimation that Jazz allowed capture on purpose."

He looked at Jazz, and Jazz shot him a look of genuine surprise in return. He then, however, shook his head. "I didn't let Skywarp get me on purpose, Soundwave. We were going to lose against the seekers that day, no nicer way around it. I had to get the others away; I thought it'd be better if it was me that got grabbed. I'm the one that can escape any cell after all. I didn't know, then, that Megatron would be making slaves out of his prisoners. Some things, turns out, can actually be harder the second time around."

Something in Jazz's visor turned distant, his thoughts briefly lost to old memories. Soundwave's vents cycled in quiet preparation, but not quiet enough. The blade that had nearly fallen aside pressed into Laserbeak's neck again, and Jazz's blaster pointed itself at Soundwave's head.

"Let's not lose focus now. I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

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"Jazz, query."

“Yes, love of my life?”

Soundwave kept his gaze on the keypad, pretending to pay full attention to his hack. “This much, not understood: the purpose of the Autobot brand painted on Megatron’s statue.”

He wasn’t looking, but no way could he miss the soft growl of Jazz’s engine. “Believe it or not, Soundwave, I was actually telling the truth that day. I have no idea who did that or why, and I was mad for more reasons than I could tell you that day. Gratifying though it may have been to watch, I really didn’t need Megatron getting spooked by the Autobots. I needed him to take us for granted, to forget about us. Didn’t much enjoy the broken arm either.”

He sighed, then shrugged it off with a smile. “I feel like this is good for us. Don’t you? We can finally talk to each other for real: no lies, total honesty, just like you’re always wanting.”

Soundwave stopped what he was doing and shot a cold glare at Jazz, who gestured with gun back to the lock. “Move it along, sugarspark, I got a schedule to keep. I’m meeting up with old friends later tonight.”

Indeed he was, and in spite of the relaxed tone in his drawl Soundwave wasn’t missing that occasional restless fidget. He’d already made it apparent that he never expected to be found by Soundwave down here, which meant at least one part of the plan wasn’t going according to plan. Soundwave suspected that Jazz was more nervous than he was letting on.

“Jazz must know, no Autobot invasion on Iacon can succeed,” he pointed out. “Even if ability to withstand rain found, city’s defense against aerial attacks programmed for automatic engagement.”

“Bots ain’t coming from the air, Soundwave.”

Because they were coming through the *spacebridge*, of course. Soundwave silently cursed his own oversight, envisioning the Stunticons’ fuel camp overrun by a surprise attack, desperately calling to warn the Cybertron headquarters where there was no one to hear. Even with Menosaur, all those prisoners - Autobots and imprisoned neutrals combined - would be too much under Prowl’s leadership for the young Stunticons to handle. It would end in only disaster.

“By now Prowler’s probably done with those kids,” Jazz said chattily, accurately guessing his thoughts. “I hope he had the time to make sure Motormaster died slowly. And Jack’ll figure out something for the rain; he always does. I’d vote for using Shockwave as an umbrella, he’s built wide enough, but that’s not my department.”

“Autobots’ escape plan, well coordinated.”

“I prefer ‘exit strategy’.”

“However, perhaps one factor Jazz did not consider.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

At last, at long last Jazz had become distracted enough to let the scalpel drift far enough from Laserbeak’s throat, and Soundwave seized the moment to strike. He triggered the signal, already moving forward with arms outstretched to snatch her from Jazz’s arms. Jazz’s visor flashed white with alarm and he darted back well out of reach, pressing the blade’s point so deeply into her fuel line it should have punctured. Soundwave froze.

“Careful, dearest, you startled me just now. Startle one more step and I’ll put it right through her neck.”

“How...”

“How what?”

“Jazz, should be in seizures.”

“I should- Wait, did you just try to *shock punishment* me? I don’t believe it! You, of all mecha. And after all we’ve been through together.” Jazz fixed him with a wounded look, clucking his glossa in disappointment.

“Collar should be functional,” Soundwave protested. “Hook verified -”

“You double-checked me? I’m not surprised. But did you have him check before that day of the market riots, or after?”

Soundwave’s spark sank, replaying his own memories. Those riots had consumed the city, all Decepticons deployed to suppress it, including the entire Constructicon gestalt. Their slaves would have all been unsupervised, and Jazz was lying on a gurney...

“Poor Aid was a nervous wreck,” Jazz recalled. “But I told him, you’re gonna have to practice sometime, and here I am. The Cons are busy putting down my latest handiwork, so it might as well be now. Course he couldn’t disable the entire collar; you’re always checking that tracker. But the shock wires, they had to go. We were getting too close to the end, and I couldn’t afford that handicap anymore.”

A fresh surge of humiliation swelled up within Soundwave, and it wasn’t just the mortification of being checkmated by Jazz, again. Soundwave remembered everything about that night after the riots: carrying Jazz home in his arms, Jazz gently teasing him that they’d won that point together against the world. It was the first time Jazz kissed him, suddenly shy and insecure beneath all those pretenses - one of the few times Soundwave had ever thought he could see the *real* Jazz.

“Don’t hate the player, Soundwave,” Jazz murmured. “Hate the game. You made your mistake when you stopped playing it. You thought you won just because we had a nice tumble in the jungle, but the game was never about us. The game was going on long before you even snatched me from the seekers, which meant I had to change all my strategies. But that’s alright, I coped; you didn’t make such a bad tool yourself.”

When Soundwave noticed the pain sensors hailing from his hands, he forced himself to uncurl his fists. “Soundwave, knows what Jazz trying to do.”

“That’d be a first.”

“Jazz, trying to make me angry. Trying to treat me as enemy, not master. Establishing such emotional distance must make this easier.”

Jazz snorted. “I wouldn’t worry too much about that; I’ve been waiting for this night a long time. Ain’t nothin’ hard about it.”

“Your time with me, so terrible? Jazz fed, cared for, indulged.”

“Are you...” Jazz’s mouth was falling open as he gaped at Soundwave in astonishment. “Trying to *persuade* me out of escaping slavery?”

“Jazz -”

“You made me *eat* out of your *hand*. Did you really think I’d learned to like that, that I would just keep doing it forever? You thought you could make us your servants, when we were soldiers for the Prime! Did you all think we would settle for being your pets for the rest of our lives?”

“Megatron, could have executed you.”

“No, love,” Jazz corrected. “Megatron *should* have executed me. Failure to do that was his last great mistake. Now stop wasting my time, and get me through that door or I’ll do this again.”

Soundwave didn’t even have a chance to ask *what again* before Jazz snapped one of the finer struts in Laserbeak’s wing in half. Soundwave swallowed back his anguish and struggled to hang onto his composure.

“Jazz, advised against going deeper. The result, perhaps more than you expect.”

“You’ve been down here before?”

“Once, with Megatron. You will not like what you find.”

“Then I’ll take care of that when it happens, like I always do. Now get on with it.”

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“On Earth, what happened? Why did Jazz decline to shoot me?”

It was the first time either of them had spoken in over a breem, walking in cold silence. Jazz looked at him with only blank surprise on his visor. “Well that’s obvious, isn’t it? Laserbeak was out there in the jungle, getting fed a fake video by Hound. How was she going to get back to Cybertron and share it with Megatron without you?”

“This reason, logical,” Soundwave agreed. “But Jazz, where was music? What human song was playing in your mind to represent such careful, tricky plans? Soundwave was there, and no music in your head to be found. Jazz’s thoughts blank, confused.” Smugly he watched comprehension filtering into Jazz’s expression, followed by a flash of nearly-invisible panic. “Perhaps Jazz knew I must be allowed to live. But in that moment, Jazz saved me instinctively, without thinking at all. And this, you knew. You panicked. For the first time, Jazz forced to contemplate that perhaps some feelings real -”

“Shut up!” Unexpectedly Jazz slammed the butt of his blaster handle against the wall, and the loud rattle echoed in the halls around them. “It was a lie, Soundwave. Get it through your head, it was always a lie. Everything I ever did, or said, or made you feel, was all part of an act designed to distract and use you. Not one part of it was real, not even a little. Do you understand that?”

“This much understood: Jazz, excellent liar.”

A little of the haughty anger eased out of Jazz’s face, and he bowed his head in thanks for the compliment. Soundwave wasn’t finished, though. “Other Autobots, not excellent liars.”

“Say what?”

“In Shockwave’s home, when they discovered your deceptions, Autobots putting on act of anger?”

No, they are not such talented liars as Jazz. Autobots, genuinely angry at you.”

“That’s really not any of your business, Soundwave.”

“Autobots, still hate Jazz?”

“They follow my orders, and that’s good enough for now. After we’re free, I doubt they’ll still be holding onto any of those grudges.”

“And if they are,” Soundwave pressed mercilessly. “Was it worth it? Lying to those who trust you? Using those closest to you as tools and pawns?”

“For freedom,” Jazz assured him, “anything is worth it.”

“What good is freedom if you are alone? Jazz, speaking truth earlier: you haven’t found what you’re looking for. You will not find it in this escape.”

“Don’t talk like you know what I want! Don’t talk like you’ve ever had to be a slave - *twice*. All I ever wanted in this life was to be my own boss, own my own nightspot so I could dance whenever I wanted. Maybe have a little illegal black market trading in the backroom. But Megatron ruined that dream for me, so now I’ll ruin his.”

“I will not let you.”

“Soundwave, you’ve *already lost*. Can’t you see that? Did you call Starscream?”

“Query, not understood.”

“When you had your little a-ha! moment, when you realized he was innocent. Did you call him?”

Soundwave hesitated, remembering again that strange comm received in the middle of the night.

“Course you didn’t,” Jazz added, misinterpreting his silence. “Because *you* know that *he* already knows he’s innocent. But is he burning out the comm channels trying to call and explain? Trying to defend himself? No, he’s not. Starscream knows an opportunity when one drops out of the sky.

Public favor was already on his side, all he needed was the right reason to break away and declare himself independent. And half the planet follows. It doesn’t matter what you say now, it doesn’t matter who you tell; Starscream is done working for Megatron. Which is just as well since Megatron is soon to be ash anyway - him and his pathetic one-eyed paper pusher.”

Jazz smirked, and Soundwave ignored it. “And me?”

“What?”

“Jazz, named Autobots’ targets. Constructicons, Megatron, Shockwave, all critical to existence of Decepticon Empire. But Soundwave and cassettes, equally critical. Team supplies all surveillance and reconaissance; without us, Decepticons blind. Logically, Autobots should consider me a threat and target me as well.”

“Well, we didn’t. For what you did- for what you tried to do for Blaster’s cassettes, you get to live.”

“This, Jazz’s decision?”

“Don’t read too much into it, my love. I’m only a monster when I have to be, and I don’t have any interest in letting your brats die the same miserable long death that the cassettibots did. And

Starscream will treat you right. He's smart enough to know he'll need you if he wants to run this planet even halfway competently."

"And where will Jazz be?"

"Why? Gonna write?"

"Because I will hunt you and find you," Soundwave answered matter-of-factly. Jazz nearly tripped over his own pedes at that, and hastily backed away when Soundwave rounded on him. "Jazz, thinks to be first possession that has run away? Ravage, attempted to run three times during first vorn of ownership. Soundwave tracked him, recaptured him, and returned him home every time until he accepted his place. I will do same for you, because you belong to me."

He had the satisfaction of watching Jazz stare up at him, nervous fear blanching away the color from the edges of his visor, before his slave tried to cover it all up with a flippant smile.

"Well... that all sounds like another splendid game for you to lose. But it's going to have to wait until we're done here, when I've gotten what I came for and sweet *fucking Primus another floor down?*" So said because Soundwave had just led him to the next stairwell down into the gloom. The engine in his chest snarled with frustration and he stamped a pede against the ancient floor. "Are you kidding me? How deep did Megatron have to bury his failure?"

"Jazz, very close now."

"I hope, my darling Soundwave, that you haven't been dishonest at all about where we're going? I hope that very much, for Laserbeak's sake."

"Soundwave, not the dishonest mech here."

"No, you're just the saint who would have kept me chained to your berth for the rest of my life, or at least until Megatron got in the mood for another threesome. Are you waiting for something? Down the steps, now."

"Soundwave, waiting for Jazz to acknowledge truth for reason in not shooting me on Earth."

"I will shoot you now if that's what you really want! Do you think I won't?"

"Soundwave, can only draw conclusions based on former behavior."

"You are such a smug, snotty piece of -" An odd look crossed Jazz's face and he bit the words off mid-sentence. "Do you hear that?"

"Jazz, must be exhausted. Uncommon for you to repeat one joke in same night."

"No, I mean it: *do you hear that?*" He lapsed into silence long enough that Soundwave realized he could hear it, though it was far from clear what 'it' was. Distant, tinny echoes filtered from somewhere above their heads, like something scraping itself through the walls. Alarmed, Jazz took a long step back from Soundwave and kept his blaster aimed at his chest, audials almost twitching in effort to track the noise. If he wasn't expecting an Autobot down here, then Soundwave allowed a little hope to kindle within him. Maybe, just maybe, Shockwave or one of the Constructicons had made their way here, maybe help was coming after all. But it didn't sound like charging Decepticon soldiers. The bangs and rattles were getting louder, rapidly so, and the crack of breaking metal was so loud that Soundwave almost expected the ceiling overhead to cave in.

Jazz obviously thought so too, gaze flicking anxiously upward before hastily refocusing on

Soundwave again. "Go on, move," he hissed, and this time Soundwave let himself be herded down the first few steps. Then they both jumped when a loud yell split the silence, the vent grating above the stairwell exploded outward and something shot out of the shaft in a blur. It hit Jazz first, who collided with Soundwave and all of them tumbled down the stairs in a series of painful bumps and crushed limbs. The moment his thoughts caught up Soundwave's first one was for Laserbeak, and he scrambled to find her. She'd sprawled across the landing, her wing awkwardly bent but otherwise miraculously unharmed, the scalpel dropped elsewhere. Jazz saw her too. He'd been knocked farther, rolled past all of them, but he hadn't lost his gun. In the half of an astrosecond that it took for Soundwave to reach out, Jazz pulled up into a crouch and aimed it straight at her head.

Soundwave froze, wondering. Would he really? Would he pull that trigger and put a lasershot in her tiny cranium, would he kill her? Would he do it knowing Soundwave would kill him afterwards? Because he would, and surely Jazz must know that, but Jazz didn't seem to mind too much right now. He was easing the trigger back into firing mode, preparing to shoot. Jazz was ready to risk her death and his own to win this game, and Soundwave was not. Laserbeak was something he could not afford to lose.

Soundwave raised himself up onto his knees, hands held upward in tacit surrender. Jazz was relieved, he could tell; his vents opened wider and his visor deepened a shade, but he was nice enough to not taunt Soundwave over it. He merely clicked the blaster back into safety mode.

"Uh, sorry," mumbled the heap that brought on the whole mess. A mech with red plating, some of it garishly painted with tacky flame decals, stopped rubbing his dented helm and stared at the both of them. "Did I, um, interrupt something?"

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters



## on resurrection

Soundwave did not think, to be very honest about it all, that he'd ever been so stunned in his entire life. That ridiculous young mech, this simpleton from the ghettos who'd unwittingly dealt him so many headaches and then had the exasperating temerity to just vanish - was *here*. Right in front of him, still staring at them both with such an idiotic look in his naive blue optics. His plating was scuffed and scraped, some of it liberally smeared with the ancient rust all around them, like he'd been down here for a while. Was this where he was hiding, all this time?

"Uhh... so anyway." Apprehensively he looked from him to Jazz and back again, taking in their tense postures, the gun in Jazz's hand, the prone Laserbeak sprawled between them. "You're busy, and I'll just be going now."

He tried to turn to the stairs and Jazz shot a hole in the wall an inch away from his head, never once taking his optics off Soundwave and then promptly bringing the blaster right back to Laserbeak's head. Hot Rod squawked and jumped backward, nearly falling over on his backside.

"That was my way of saying, 'Don't move, please.' One moment." In one deft move Jazz scooped Laserbeak back into the crook of his arm, stood and backed away until he could comfortably keep both of them in his sightline. Soundwave could tell well enough that Jazz looked just as flabbergasted as he himself felt, but to Hot Rod he merely flashed a patronizing smile. "Well, look what the rain washed in. You're a long way from your refinery, kid."

Hot Rod hunched his shoulder struts, looking a cross between guilty and defensive. "I know."

"So you looking for somethin'? Or just very, very lost?"

"Both... sort of." Yet again he looked from Jazz's gun to the sigil on Soundwave's chest, the obvious question forming in his optics. "Should he be -"

"Optics on me, Junior," Jazz prompted. "You know if you were hoping to play Megatron's groupie tonight, you're about ten stories in the wrong direction."

"What? No, that's not- Look, I'm just trying to find my friend, okay? I didn't mean to wind up down here. I don't even know where 'here' is. All I do know is that every time I go looking for him, I wind up somewhere in this hole instead. It's not like I want to! But the voices -"

He cut himself off, and the light in Jazz's visor sharpened with curiosity. "Go on."

"I have these, um, voices in my head. Like a comlink, but not. Deeper."

"And what do the voices say?"

"I don't know, I can't hear them. I mean, I *hear* them, I hear them mumbling and whispering in my head. But never loud enough for me to get the words. When I'm down here, though, they're almost clear enough. I think I can almost hear what they want to tell me. But only almost."

With every additional word of nonsense that came out of the boy's mouth, Soundwave was left more and more perplexed and he could see Jazz was much the same. He exchanged a bewildered look with Soundwave and then huffed a little through his vents. "Great. Just what I needed tonight: a spoilerful of crazy."

"I know what it sounds like," Hot Rod muttered resentfully. "But if it bothers you, I'll go."

Again he looked to the stairs, and again Jazz raised his blaster in a meaningful way. “Ah no, afraid I can’t let you do that. You might do something silly, like try to find a Decepticon and tell him what I’m doing-”

“What *are* you doing?”

“- and I don’t have time for that, so you’re stuck with us for the rest of the night, Paintjob.”

“My name is Hot Rod.”

“Hot Rod,” Jazz murmured thoughtfully, so quick on the take that Soundwave knew he’d been deliberately baiting the mech into giving up his name. Idly he rolled his head one way and the other, scrutinizing. “Hot Rod... Hot Rod. No, doesn’t ring a bell. And I am *very* good with names.”

“Huh?”

“Have we met? Ever?”

Blankly Hot Rod stared at Jazz. “Uh, don’t think so. I know who you are, though. You’re the dancing slave.”

“Most just call me Jazz. You’re sure we’ve never met? Let’s face it, you’d probably remember me more than I’d remember you.”

Hot Rod’s mouth fell open, some kind of indignant noise forming from within. “*No*, we’ve never met. I’m not an Autobot. I’m not a Decepticon. I’m just an ordinary mech sparked in an ordinary temple, working in Shockwave’s ordinary factories my whole ordinary life. Right now I’m kind of missing that.”

“Missing,” Jazz echoed, and something sparked deep within his visor. “You’ve been down here a while, haven’t you?”

“Longer than I ever wanted. I found this cache of energon bars -”

“You went *missing*,” Jazz repeated with extra relish, his gaze shifting to Soundwave with a triumphant gleam. “I’ll be damned. Gotta hand it to you, babe, that was a tricky one. I’d have never, ever guessed.”

Soundwave glared in silence. Hot Rod looked confused again, which seemed to be his natural state. “Guessed...?”

“You know Director Soundwave, Hot Rod?”

“No.”

“Well he knows you. He’s been looking for you.”

“For me? What? Why?”

“I was hopin’ you could tell me. He’s mad at me right now, and he never tells me anything when he’s mad.”

Nervously Hot Rod looked back from Jazz to him, spoiler wilting slightly under Soundwave’s menacing stare. “Uh... is it about the speeding?”

Jazz rolled a disgusted groan down his throat. “Ugh, never mind - I don’t have time for this. Let’s

just get back to where we left off, shall we? My love, you know the way. Come along, Flames.”

“Please don’t -”

“Too late for that, it’s the three of us now. That’s how Soundwave likes it.” He grinned mirthlessly when he caught Soundwave’s look, barrel of his gun bumping against Hot Rod’s head. “Now move.”

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“So...” They hadn’t lasted half a breem before the neutral was opening his mouth again, much to Soundwave’s irritation. Probably Jazz’s too. “Sorry if this is a dumb question -”

“Then don’t ask it.”

“But, for an escaping slave, aren’t you sorta heading the wrong way?”

“Side errand. Don’t worry, I’ll be leaving Cybertron soon enough.”

“You’re really gonna leave the planet?” Hot Rod sounded appalled. “But, this is our home.”

“It’s someone’s home. Not ours, though. Not anymore.”

“Oh.” Hot Rod lapsed into silence, which did not last long. “I get why you don’t like it, I guess. Sometimes I see you guys with your masters, and I think it must be a little rough -” Jazz snorted. “But it’s kinda your own fault, right? If the Autobots had just shared Earth’s fuel with Cybertron, Megatron wouldna had to fight the war like he did.”

“Ah, Shockwave’s History 101 rears its ugly one-eyed head.”

“What? It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Oh, is it that part of the night? Already? Well as you may have noticed, I’m a little pushed for time. So let me save us both the trouble, and I’ll supply both sides of this next bit. ‘Autobots are evil and deserve everything they get, rape and slavery included.’ ‘Oh no, my little spawn of the state, the Autobots were just trying to trade for Earth’s fuel instead of steal it.’ ‘That’s not what my radio’s history hour says!’ ‘That’s because Shockwave’s a big fat liar, which, as his employee, you should already know.’ ‘But I wuv Megatron, I draw little hearts around his picture at nights and he can do no wrong!’”

“I don’t -”

“What’s it like, to function as a sponge for everything your government tells you, ever? I admit, in a way I’m a little envious. I do nothing but lie, all the time, as the quiet one up there will tell you as soon as he feels like talking. But I have to work for it. I have to convince my audience, lay down plausible reasoning, establish alibis, and never ever drop the act. Must be nice, just standing in front of a crowd and telling them whatever he likes. If they don’t believe, well, that’s usually their problem.”

“I don’t just believe *everything* the empire says,” Hot Rod said defensively. “But I do know it was the Decepticons that brought me out of stasis. That the fuel started comin’ through their spacebridge,

that it happened after they won the war. You gonna tell me I'm wrong about that too?"

"No, but I'll ask you a question. If the war went the other way, and it was the Autobots that came home with the fuel, would you be alright with your precious Megatron wearing a collar for the rest of his life? Never allowed to transform, never allowed to live alone, to *sleep* alone, turned into someone else's possession for the rest of his life?"

Hot Rod stopped walking rather abruptly, and from the sound of things actually turned to stare at Jazz. "You guys aren't allowed to *transform*?"

Jazz's systems hiccuped, and in the corner of his vision Soundwave saw him gape at Hot Rod.

When he spoke, it was to Soundwave. "*Gambheerata se, aap ke lie kyon dekh rahe te yah havaee jahaaj?*" he pleaded. "*Seriously, why were you looking for this space cadet? Won't you give me a hint, just a little one?*"

Soundwave remained silent. Hot Rod squinted curiously at Jazz, confused by the stream of foreign words. "What was that?"

"Grown-up talk. Don't worry about it."

"You're kind of mean."

"Well I am, after all, an Autobot. We're evil, or haven't you heard?" Jazz had to prod Hot Rod into moving again, and Soundwave heard the frustrated rev of his powerful engine.

"This is what I get for just trying to do the right thing, I guess. All I wanted was to find my friend."

"So you said. How adorably loyal of you."

"Well he is my best pal. We've been friends for vorns. Then one day he just disappeared - no word, no anything. He wouldn't do that to his crew, not on purpose. So we've been looking for him. Some folks say Megatron shipped him to Earth, but I know that's not true. Megatron wouldn't do something like that, not to his own people."

"Oh no," Jazz agreed cheerfully. "Megatron would never do a thing like that. Right, Soundwave?" He didn't wait long for an answer he knew Soundwave was not going to give. "Your friend, what's he look like?"

"He's a triple changer, big and -"

"Green?"

"Yeah," Hot Rod confirmed, surprised. "How did you know?"

"I saw him on Earth, working in the slave camp."

"But -"

"But you don't know Megatron in the least, not even a little bit. Pray that you never do." Hastily he put a hand on Hot Rod's shoulder before he could just walk right into Soundwave, who had abruptly stopped. "Whoa, hold up. What's wrong, love? Why are we stopping?"

"Because destination, reached," Soundwave answered, speaking for the first time since Hot Rod had stumbled onto them. He watched his blue optics whiten with surprise at the sound of his voice, staring at him stupidly. "This door, opens to Megatron's vault."

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An uncomfortable tingle moved down Soundwave's spinal strut when the vault door swung open.

He was not sure why; he had been in this room before, and though it wasn't exactly pleasant, he had never been unduly bothered. Perhaps it was just his own stress, now stretched to the snapping point by the events of the night. He hesitated only a moment, then crossed the threshold before Jazz could get too impatient. Lights flickered on, throwing their sterile glare on the contents of the room.

Mostly that meant the body of Optimus Prime himself, stretched out on a massive slab and taking up most of the space.

Unless exposed to harsh elements, the dead frames of Cybertronians did not deteriorate, so even after all this time he was recognizable... mostly. Grayed and brittle struts were still twisted and splintered from the force of the explosion, whole chunks of his body outright missing. No matter what anyone felt about the Prime, it was a grotesque sight, and Soundwave could hear well enough the shocked gasp Jazz tried to strangle in his own throat. Soundwave watched his hands tremble, but then he held his chin high and moved closer to the head, gun never straying from Soundwave's chest.

"So here you are," he murmured. "Fancy running into you in a dump like this... who would have guessed?" He gave the other two a measuring look and, weighing the risks, set Laserbeak down by the Prime's shoulder so he could have one hand free. With a tenderness Soundwave had only rarely seen in him, he touched reverent fingertips to what was left of the facemask.

"You deserved better than this. I'm sorry that I let it happen, I'm sorry about all of it. But it's okay - I'm going to get them out, just like I promised you every night. I'll get them all out."

Hot Rod crept closer, staring at the corpse in fascination. "Who is that?"

"A good mech. Probably the last one." Vaguely Jazz gestured at a shelved alcove, containing the only other object in the room. "See that shiny thing? Pick it up, I'll need you to carry that for me."

"What is it?"

"Nothin' special, just the Matrix of the Primes. Hurry up."

Hot Rod shuffled the few steps closer, looking properly wary. The meager light shimmering within the Matrix reflected on the sheen of his optics, and he bent closer as if he could peer into its depths.

He extended one hand to touch, then hesitated. The tingle was back in Soundwave's struts, and his sensors picked up a faint buzz, like a frequency just out of range.

"Are you sure I should -"

"Stop asking stupid questions and do as I say!" Jazz snapped, close to his own breaking point.

Promptly his attention switched back to Soundwave. "This is where I leave you, my love. It's been... well, it's been a ride. I'm sorry that I don't have time for a prettier goodbye, but time is short. Just back yourself into that corner there, and your kids can come and get you when the rain's done."

And when the empire was done, so went the unspoken message. Soundwave's gaze dropped to the symbiote by Jazz's hand. "Jazz, will also leave behind Laserbeak."

"Soundwave." It was fast, but Soundwave just caught the flicker of regret in that visor. "You know

I have to keep her with me. She's my hostage."

"Jazz will not take my symbiote."

"I have to! But I'll keep her safe. So long as nobody on your side does anything stupid, she'll be fine, I promise."

"Jazz's word, worth nothing!" Soundwave near shouted, fists clenched at his sides. "Jazz, operates on only false pretenses, deceptions and lies. My trust in your promises, impossible."

"I don't really see where you have the choice," Jazz said sharply. "Now back up and shut up before I change my mind about sending her back and just decide to keep her. Permanently."

"Jazz cannot -"

"Why not? She's cute, fun to play with, and if she doesn't like the new arrangement then I'll put her in a cage. It's no less than what you did for me!"

"Jazz should know better than to come between Soundwave and symbiote," Soundwave growled, his voice now pitched ominously low. Jazz's response was a flippant sneer.

"And you'll do what, exactly, about it?"

Soundwave had taken enough. Enough threats on Laserbeak, threats on his home, his leader, all of it doled out with an infuriating smugness that he could bear no longer. Somewhere within him, his tolerance snapped and Soundwave executed his most reckless, desperate counterattack. His speakers started to play human music.

Jazz blinked and stared at them, baffled, but that was before he even took the time to recognize the tune. When he did, a flash of vulnerability was replaced quickly enough with hard resentment.

Soundwave didn't know its name, but that didn't matter. Enough to know that it was the music playing in Jazz's mind that night on Earth, the two of them alone in the jungle.

"What the -" Jazz started to say, but Soundwave wasn't done. There was no one in the room to cover him, no one to give backup, and for once he ignored that risk. Without warning, Soundwave shut down his sensors and dove straight into Jazz's mind. "Oh, you sonofa b-"

*Moaning, gasping softly in time with every thrust against the tree behind them, Jazz locked his legs around Soundwave's hips and ground his plating against his own. Electricity surged and crackled within them both, Jazz's glossa gliding within Soundwave's mouth all the while. Using the tree for leverage, Jazz shifted all his weight up onto Soundwave and toppled them both to the ground, hands everywhere at once.*

Relentlessly Soundwave continued the play the notes that had become Jazz's tag for this memory.

His theory was right after all, Jazz's memories could be recalled involuntarily if you just knew which music to broadcast. It was the only music Soundwave would have ever known to try. For as long as he played, the scene kept unfolding, Jazz's sweet meows of pleasure, his eager pushes back into Soundwave's hips, the sparks flying furious between them. He let it go on long enough that he was sure Jazz had succumbed completely to the memory, though Soundwave himself was unaffected by the music. He withdrew, re-engaging his sensors before the act of mental exploration itself could wear him down. Optics unshuttered and contracted at the overbright light, focusing first on the sight of Jazz collapsed to the ground. Moans still rolled in his vocalizer, engine rumbling with the ecstasy of remembered overloads. He only had to get to Laserbeak before he could recover completely.

Stiffly motor functions rebooted, and he stumbled forward. She was very close, lying there on the

slab, only a few steps away. So close - but then he heard the click of a gun's triggerlock, and had to shift his focus to what was behind her. Hot Rod had Jazz's gun gripped in both hands, barrel pointed at him, optics blanched almost white in contained panic.

"Stop it," he said, and his voice shook. "Whatever you're doing to him, stop."

"Hot Rod, willing to defend criminal Autobot?"

"I dunno if he's criminal or not. But- but he's right. Megatron shouldna made them slaves. Shouldna took away their driving. Nobody deserves that."

"This, act of high treason," Soundwave informed Hot Rod, his voice low and menacing. Hot Rod gulped a little.

"I know. And I am, like, super sorry about this. But you need to let him go. Please?"

On the floor, Jazz was returning to the real world. Blue light blinked wanly back into existence, visor calibrating until it found Soundwave's face and focused itself with raw hatred.

"You're a bastard," he rasped throatily. "And very, very unwise. Let me show you how unwise that was." Using the edge of the slab Jazz hauled himself onto his pedes, grasped at the scalpel, and brought it down to stab straight through the center of Laserbeak's right wing.

"Stop!" Hot Rod cried, gun now pointed at Jazz. "Don't!"

Jazz's hand stopped just short, probably less out of respect than actual fear that the inexperienced neutral was nervous enough to pull the trigger on accident. "Mind your own business, kid. This has nothing to do with you."

"She's unconscious! How can you do that to someone? Did she ever stab *you* in the arm while you were sleeping?"

Jazz stared at that determined young face, then let out a weary puff from his vents. "Fine, whatever. If it bothers you that much, then I won't." Light flashed off the blade when he tipped it in Soundwave's direction. "Which isn't to say I wouldn't enjoy carving you into little pieces right now. That was a low blow, my love."

"Soundwave, learning to play by Jazz's rules."

"Jeez, listen to you guys! You're so- so *weird*. I can't figure out if you hate each other or love each other, but I'm sick of you both and I'm just gonna go now okay?" Hot Rod took a step back from the both of them, vent whirring in his distress.

"You do as you like, Flames, but do yourself a favor and toss that slingshot back over here. You're only gonna hurt yourself with it."

"Shut up. I've practiced with guns before." He took another step back, then flinched when a deep roar - like one of Earth's rolls of thunder - reverberated above them. "Um, what was that?"

Jazz swore in Italian under his ventilations. "The party's starting, and I'm missing it. That's how behind I am, great. Soundwave, you know how I hate to miss the party."

Fresh alarm bloomed in Soundwave's spark at the thought of what was going on above, made all the worse when another explosion made the lights sputter. Jazz cursed again and moved to scoop Laserbeak back into his arms, Soundwave weighed the risk in attacking him while he was distracted,

and then something happened that none of them could have expected. Another explosion shook Decepticon command, so hard that even down here the room around them shuddered. All of them stumbled, and the Matrix was rocked off its base, tipping over the shelf's edge. Standing right beside it, motivated by nothing other than simple reflex, Hot Rod reached out and caught it before it crashed to the floor.

That faint buzz exploded and a power surge knocked Soundwave right off his own pedes, flinging his massive bulk against the wall like he weighed nothing at all. Damage reports cascaded through his HUD, which in itself must have been damaged for it failed to display any problems with his visor. But damaged it surely was, because he could see nothing but white, pure white light blazing like a star all around him. His audios could pick up nothing beyond the incessant dry crackle of a frequency, cluttered with the muted cacophony of distant voices. Through the sifting static, like trying to peer through a sandstorm, Soundwave finally caught one recognizable sound, but when he did his spark almost stopped. That voice was not a voice he'd ever expected to hear again.

*"-rise, Rodimus Prime. You have been..."*

The crackling worsened, the pressure on his audios too much to bear. Soundwave couldn't stand it anymore and rebooted all sensors, desperate to clear away the overload of input. Primus primus oh primus -

The reboot helped, or at least a few seconds of time did. The room was still blazing with too much light, but now Soundwave could see it blaring out of Hot Rod's optics, out of his seams, even his mouth as it gaped wide open. He was frozen still, transfixed, as if staring at someone.

Primus, primus, oh primus... It took several seconds before Soundwave realized those weren't just the words circling in his own mind, that Jazz was whispering them over and over, staring at Hot Rod with the same captivated shock he himself felt. He'd been thrown too, was still lying crumpled against the wall, but too riveted to do anything other than gape. Eventually his stunned stare crossed with Soundwave's, and in that moment neither could do anything but look, still too caught up in the disbelief of it all.

But then even the light beams shooting out of Hot Rod's body faded, and reality returned.

Soundwave remembered his circumstances, his duties, and looked frantically about the room. So did Jazz, and realized at about the same time as Soundwave did that he was not going to reach that gun before Soundwave could. Panic flared in his visor and they both scrambled to move at the same time, Jazz lunging for Hot Rod while Soundwave dove for the weapon.

"Run!" he shouted. "Run, now!"

Still in a daze, Hot Rod blinked the last of divine white light of his optics. "Huh?"

"RUN!" Jazz barrelled into Hot Rod and shoved him to the doorway. Groggily he stumbled a few steps, and Soundwave grasped at the gun and raised it to fire. Just in time Jazz threw himself in front of Hot Rod, arms outspread, vents spinning top speed. Dead in his sights, Soundwave's finger froze on the trigger, unable to shoot at Jazz. It was enough time for Hot Rod to escape the vault, and Jazz threw himself backward out the door after, hauling the door shut on the way. Soundwave ran to cover the distance and tugged on the door, a futile effort. Jazz was probably doing everything he could on the other side to jam it. Soundwave would get through soon enough anyway, but it would give Jazz a head start. He took the time to look for Laserbeak, and cringed to find she'd broken even more struts when flung so hard against the wall by the Matrix. His poor, poor symbiote, but she was alive. After everything that had happened, all of Jazz's threats, at least she was still alive and now safe in Soundwave's arms.



He held her close to his chest for a moment, then stowed her carefully in his own subspace. It was not as good as a proper docking, but that was impossible while she was unconscious, and half crippled besides. With her safely out of harm's way, Soundwave took pragmatic shelter behind the Prime's - the *former* Prime's - morgue and fired at the vault door with his sonic rifle. The concussion warped the door and nearly brought down half the ceiling too, but the debris that had fallen on him was small enough to be negligible. In the next minute he'd crawled through the gap and was running for all he was worth.

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Their lead wasn't very great, but the two of them were much faster than he was. Soundwave pounded up the stairs, devouring the corridors in his long strides, and all the while his audios tracked them pulling further and further away, Jazz's pleas to run faster eventually dwindling to mere echoes. The ambient sounds of explosions and firefighting, meanwhile, became louder and louder, until Soundwave crashed through the door separating stairs from the corridors of Decepticon Headquarters and straight into a warzone.

The headquarters of the empire had been reduced to ruins. Huge gouges had been ripped through the outer walls, rubble cascading across the floors and acid rain pouring through. All power was down. It was the work of massive artillery, and now Soundwave knew what the explosions had been. The Autobots, after invading through the space bridge, had taken the city's own anti-air guns and swiveled them around to point at the building itself. How had they moved about in the city? Using his thrusters to pop over the spreading puddles of acid, Soundwave moved down the passage and turned the corner, where most of another wall had caved in. A huge cylindrical structure had been forced right through the cannon-strafed wall, familiar looking though it took Soundwave a few seconds to place it. It was one of their own silos from the spacebridge grounds, used to store fuel and therefore built to be impervious to the elements. It had been torn off its foundations and used to roll down the streets of Iacon, carrying the attacking Autobots inside. Oh, how Soundwave had *not* missed Prowl's unexpected displays of strategic creativity.

Soundwave maneuvered around it, trying to hail Megatron's frequency on a repeat three-astrosec basis and still not succeeding. He could hear a battle though, without question, and he turned to follow the sounds as fast as his thrusters could take him. Barely had he made it around the next bend than he came face to face with Chromia and Firestar, poised on a mound of rubble just inside the shelter from rain, razor-thin swords in each hand. They looked up sharply at his entrance and flipped on bright headlights, immediately overpowering his night-adjusted optics. Soundwave flinched and dove back behind the corner, blinded, expecting to be shot at any second. He felt nothing, however, didn't even hear anything, and after his vision had calibrated again he dared to peek around the wall.

Both were gone, as if they'd never been; vanished like ghosts in that sinister way that Elita's soldiers had always excelled. Rifle primed and ready to fire, Soundwave crossed the silent room. Nothing moved except the rain sheeting outside, hissing and popping against the broken steel. It was falling on something else too, which Soundwave saw when he drew close enough: Shockwave was sprawled across the wreckage and completely exposed to the rain, his body crisscrossed with hundreds of thin slices into which acid seeped and bubbled.

There was nothing Soundwave could do for him, even to reach out and pull him back inside, but anyway it was too late. Soundwave got no response for his hail, and the single optic that had carried

Shockwave's emotional expressions for all his life was now flat and dark. He was quite dead, and it had not been done kindly. Again, even more urgently, Soundwave set a comm for Megatron. Somewhere behind him, in the depths of the building, he heard a familiar roar.

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When Soundwave finally found Megatron, he found the heart of the battle. The Autobots had held nothing back; having already peeled away his air support and officers, their artillery had now peeled away most of the building around him. Megatron was pinned down under what shelter he could take, alone, and carrying on a one-sided war against every other Autobot in the building. In his beast form, and unbothered by what rain did trickle down his back, Grimlock opened his jaws and bellowed again, a roar answered in kind by Megatron's gun. It had to charge up again, leaving Megatron to fight off Ironhide and Sideswipe and just about everyone else with only his own fists. Now Soundwave could see why he hadn't been answering Soundwave's hails - he simply didn't have the spare second to do it. Watching him, Soundwave felt a flicker of that old awe. Megatron's gray armor was already streaked from close calls with acid rain, and he may have even been shot, going by that bad scorchmark on his left arm. But nobody would ever know it from the unflinching way he threw himself into combat, outnumbered a dozen to one and still holding his own. This was how he'd inspired a revolution.

Soundwave was preparing to move in and assist when he caught sight of Jazz again, dragging Hot Rod ruthlessly by the arm. He'd skirted the melee and was trying to haul Hot Rod up the scree of a collapsed stairwell, where glowlights indicated a hovering shuttle. Hot Rod had balked at the rain and was resisting, slowing them down. Soundwave started to follow, but then Megatron hurled an Autobot against the stairs and the whole ramshackle structure shifted, tipping them off it. Jazz scrambled for a handhold, probably would have found one if he wasn't also shoving Hot Rod to safety, slipped, and tumbled down the wreckage almost right at Megatron's pedes. Megatron looked down and saw who it was, and the blazing hatred in his optics was something Soundwave could see even from here. Already he was sprinting towards them, body moving on instinct, but which one was he going to help? His processor froze and he nearly tripped, stumbling with indecision.

Jazz knew he was in trouble the moment he looked up, and he did his best to scabble away, but he was not fast enough. Megatron had him in his sights, and he would never let this one get away. The mighty fusion cannon on his shoulder fired into Jazz's chest point blank, throwing Jazz's body back against the wall, by which time he'd moved on to other Autobots.

Soundwave thought he might break from grief at the sight. Immediately Megatron flew out of his mind as he flung himself at Jazz instead, covering his body with his own so that he might shield him from the rest of the battle. Jazz could not be dead - no, not so quickly, he couldn't be taken from Soundwave so easily! Jazz was *his*. But Jazz's visor was flat black, his body lifeless under Soundwave's anxious touch. He could feel no sparkbeat, felt nothing from his vents, not even a whisper. The damage was still smoking hot to the touch, but the smoldering chips of armor around the blast were all that moved.

No no *no*. Soundwave was too frantic to consider giving up, even as the fight raged behind him. Surrounded by enemies, no one to guard him, Soundwave pulled back from all external sensors and let himself collapse on top of Jazz, diving into what he hoped remained of Jazz's mind.

*Blackness. Silence. Void. Abruptly separated from all the thunderous noise of the world, Soundwave drifted through nothing, pure absence of light and sound. After all his times visiting here, it was surreal to come inside Jazz and find silence instead of song. Where was all his music? If it was gone, did that mean -*

*“Yup,” someone said, and Soundwave whirled around. The other mech sported a loud red paintjob on his armor, edged with flashy gold accents. Otherwise he looked very like Soundwave - humans had mistakenly called them cousins - though he was one model size smaller and many vorns younger. Blaster crossed his arms and nodded, optics somber. “It means he’s dying. In fact, he’s already dead.”*

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on the edge

Soundwave stared at Blaster, looking as real and solid as any day in the past thousand vorns in which Soundwave had faced him on the battlefield. Instinctively he sent commands to prime the rifle on his shoulder, but when he gripped the barrel to adjust aim Blaster just rolled his optics.

“Primus, Soundwave, put that away. What do you think you’re gonna do, shoot me? I’m dead.”

He snorted and turned away, shoving his rifle carelessly aside as he did so. “And our builders thought *you* were the smart one. Sheesh.”

Soundwave nearly stumbled back from the casual push, spark spinning madly in his chest. Blaster, a dead mech, had just *touched* him, and with a strength he’d never shown in his own mortal body.

Alarm prickled up and down his struts.

“Reason for Blaster’s presence?” he asked cautiously.

“Oh gosh, I *am* rusty in my Soundwave-ese,” Blaster drawled. “Does that mean ‘how can you be here, Blaster?’ or ‘why are you here, Blaster?’ I’ll assume it was the first one. I’m here because you’re in Jazz’s mind, and right now he’s more on my side of the Well than yours. Busy dying, and all that.”

Fists clenched at his sides. “Soundwave will not allow Blaster to take Jazz.”

“Take him? You really are an idiot. Jazz is my friend, do you think I want him to die? You self-absorbed walking dial tone, I’m not here to stop you from saving Jazz’s life, I’m here to *help* you.” His vents huffed scornfully.

“Possibility to save Jazz... exists?”

“Maybe,” Blaster replied, casting an arch look back at Soundwave. “Depends.”

Soundwave was almost afraid to ask. “Factors?”

“Whether you’re capable of learning anything. You know, from the last time you tried to keep someone alive.”

The words were so casually sharp that Soundwave recoiled, spark crushing under the unexpected pain. Blaster didn’t miss the way he flinched, one corner of his mouth pulling up in a humorless grin. “Hurts, don’t it?”

“Blaster, angry?”

“That Aerosmith wimped out in the nineties? Yes. At you? Not like how you think I am. Hell, you’re the reason I’m still here, hovering on the edge of the Well like this. I couldn’t go all the way in, not without knowing what happened to my little guys. So I stayed, and I watched. I watched every minute of it.”

“Soundwave, tried -”

“Don’t I know it,” Blaster said flatly. “You left no stone unturned, no night cycle fully slept through, no cassettibot not rocked into recharge.”

“Soundwave, failed.”

“That too. And it was even worse from where I stood. Can you imagine what that was like, watching them fall into death one after another? Not fighting, not even trying, until every symbiote that I’d just spent centuries protecting was dead. And I couldn’t do fuck-all about it.”

“Soundwave, desired alternate result,” he pleaded.

“You and me both.” Blaster curled his fist and held it to his chest glass, bowing his head in brief silence. At that moment Soundwave sensed something almost like his own awareness of his cassettes in the physical world, the presence of four tiny sparks softly glowing within.

“You couldn’t save them,” Blaster murmured, just as Soundwave had begun to tremble. “And I should have moved on after they joined me. But by the time I could- I couldn’t. Because, fraggit, I was worried about you. Soundwave, the monotoned icebox, the mech I spent my whole life hating. Worried.” He snorted softly and shook his head.

“After they were gone, all you could do was punish and hate on yourself. You were sinking hard and you were taking your cassettes down with you. Then Jazz happened - as he does - and the sinking stopped. Still couldn’t leave though, oh no. By then I was well and truly hooked. I had to see for myself where this would go, if it would turn into the colossal shuttlewreck that I knew it would. I was mostly right. You and Jazz are just about the least two compatible mecha in the whole universe.”

“Blaster, not lost penchant for talkative behavior,” Soundwave observed irritably.

“The problem, you see,” Blaster continued, as if he hadn’t heard, “is that you fell in love with a mech who doesn’t know how to love you back. Not you or anyone else in his long, miserable life. He’s everybody’s friend, our Jazz, but only the young and stupid try to love him. The rest of us settled for a romp in the berth and thanked Primus that he picked our side of the war. You, Soundwave, have learned well enough by now what he’s really like. Believe me when I tell you that holding a knife to the throat of an unconscious cassette is the least of it. After all that, everything he’s done to you tonight, do you really still love him?”

Soundwave hesitated, considering the question anew in the wake of this horrible night.

“Soundwave... angry. But, not ready to lose him. Jazz, must be alive.”

“I think so too. Sadly for all of us, you’re the one that came to save him, so our chances aren’t great. Work with what the world gives you, I guess.”

“Soundwave,” he informed Blaster frostily, “prepared to do anything necessary to prevent Jazz’s death.”

“I doubt it. But you’re the one that’s supposed to be honest, so we’ll see.” He shrugged and tipped back to lean against the nothingness behind him, easily as if there were a solid wall. Soundwave was being reminded more and more why he’d always loathed conversing with Blaster, and struggled to keep patience.

“How?”

“Well first of all we have to find him. That’s a whole lotta empty out there *but* it’s all in the bait. A little Michael Jackson, I think, should do the trick.” Human music trickled out of his speakers, ratcheting up in volume by the second until - curiously enough - Jazz actually appeared. It was impossible for Soundwave to see where he came from, but he simply wandered in out of the black looking, understandably, rather dazed. His visor blinked a few times before managing to focus on the source of the music.

“B- Blaster?” he whispered, and got a cheerful wave in return.

“Jazz! Get your aft over here and say hi to a mech!” He opened his arms wide and Jazz threw himself into him, laughing with giddy relief.

“Jazzman!”

“My Jukebox Hero!” They parted so they could engage in some complicated ritual handshake, then came together again for one last fast hug. Somewhere behind him, Soundwave thought he heard a distant noise, maybe a snatch of music. He tilted his head, but the sound was already gone. “Mech, what are you *doing* here?”

“Better to ask what you are doing here, my friend. Getting caught flat-footed by Megatron?” Blaster clucked his glossa disapprovingly. “Very sloppy, Jazz. That’s the kind of thing that’ll get you killed. And did.”

Jazz groaned, mostly in disgust. “I was distracted. And it was a long night. Long year. I was trying to pull off the perfect escape, but there were just too many moving parts. Too many surprises, even for an escape artist genius like myself.” If he noticed the way Blaster rolled his optics at Soundwave, he didn’t show it. For that matter, if he’d noticed Soundwave at all he hadn’t given any indication.

“I tripped, I fell. That was that. It was probably inevitable that I couldn’t pull it off without at least one casualty anyway.”

*-on top of the world and the next it’s fallin on me-* This time Soundwave knew he heard it, thin music circling somewhere around them in the oblivion. It was nowhere near the volume usually playing in Jazz’s mind, but it was there. *-a far cry from the world we thought we’d inherit, it’s a far cry from the way we thought we’d share it-*

Blaster looked like he’d heard it too. “Maybe ‘that’ doesn’t have to be that,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean: look.” He took Jazz’s chin in his hand and turned his head to look straight at Soundwave, and it worked. Blue light blanched to white when Jazz finally saw him, armor plates bristling instinctively.

“*You*,” he choked. “What are *you* doing here- what is *he* doing here?”

“Same reason as ever, Jazz,” Blaster said calmly. “He’s here for you. He came here to save your life.”

“I thought you said I died!”

“Your body did. Megatron’s shot went through most of your core systems and pierced your spark casing, so it stopped spinning. But it hasn’t gone out, not yet. And that’s what’s keeping some of your neural functions online. You still have a mind for Soundwave to visit, Jazz. All you have to do is go with him, back out into the world, and you can live!”

Jazz looked at Blaster, contemplating that for about one astrosecond, then pointedly turned his back on Soundwave. “So. How’s the afterlife? Do I get to haunt anyone? Can I haunt Starscream?”

“Oh come on, Jazz,” Blaster huffed. “I just told you -”

“That I have to go with Soundwave. Well that’s not going to happen. I’ve just spent the last year of my life scheming in every conceivable way how to make the exact *opposite* of that happen. So sorry

you wasted your time -” This he said over his shoulder, in Soundwave’s vague direction. “- except not really. You can run along back to Megatron now.”

“Jazz!”

“Can’t hear you over the Springsteen!” Jazz assured Blaster, the music around them upping itself to what was close to Jazz’s normal volume. With casual ease he moved into his usual twisting and skipping motions. “Get it? Because I’m ‘dancing in the dark’.”

“Jazz, there is *no dancing* in the Well,” Blaster snapped, and that seemed to at least get a flicker of his attention. “There is no music. No parties, no jokes, no games. It’s just... quiet, forever. You turn away from life now, you turn away forever. No second chances. Are you really going to refuse the world?”

“But I have to go back with *him*.”

“So? You just have to let him bring you back, not marry him.”

“Actually, no, or did you miss that bit earlier? He threatened me. He told me that wherever I go in this universe, he will follow. No matter how far I run, he will keep coming to catch me and put me back in his cage. *That* is the kind of life I can look forward to if I go back. So thanks, but no thanks. Now don’t you have to guide me into the Well or something?”

“I’m not here to guide you to a goddamn thing,” Blaster said flatly. “I’m the bouncer.”

“Oh shut up. What do you think you’re going to do, throw me back out into the world because ‘it’s for my own good’? Like you even know what it was like, what he’s put me through!”

“I know exactly what he’s put you through, handfeeding and all.” He slid a sideways glance at Soundwave and added a very snide, “Classy.” To Jazz, he went on: “Not only have I been watching, I was there. I came to you in your recharge. Takes some work, but if I try hard enough, I can trigger memory file recall during defragmentation.”

“My dream,” Jazz whispered, surprised and more than a little discomfited. “That was you?”

“I had to try. The night you learned the truth, I had to help you get past it. Not for your sake, but for his. He already hated himself so much; I couldn’t let you hate him too.”

“Touching,” Jazz remarked sourly. “You hid all this affection for him very well when you were alive, B. Well don’t let me stop you, go on, follow him out of here and enjoy the honeymoon.”

“That option isn’t open to me, or anybody else here. Just you.”

To that Jazz just shrugged and turned his back. **BUT YOU CAN’T HAVE IT HERE, AND I WON’T LET YOU STEER. YOU KNOW I DON’T WANT YOU IN MY MIND!**

“Blaster, did same for me,” Soundwave murmured, keeping his voice low, quietly reeling from this last revelation. “Initiated memory file playback during recharge.”

“Yup, sure did.”

“Blaster also spoke. Declared Jazz would never be mine.”

“Meant it too. But never mind that right now, I’m working on Jazz. And as usual, he doesn’t want to play by the rules. Lucky for you, I happen to be fluent in the one language Jazz can’t lie in.” He

pointed up into the darkness where a human still sang. IT'S GONNA TAKE A HUNDRED THOUGHTS TO MAKE THIS ONE DISAPPEAR. A TRAIN LIKE THAT COULD TRAVEL A SOUL FOR YEARS, A TERRIBLE THOUGHT COULD HAVE A TERRIBLY LONG CAREER.

Jazz had wandered a few steps away, but seemed to have lost his mood for dancing. Instead he was learning Blaster's trick of moving about in this space, swinging himself up to sit on the edge of nothingness. Defiantly he faced away from them, kicking his legs back and forth. Humming along deep in his vocalizer, Blaster wandered closer.

"So, what was Plan A, Jazz?"

"What?"

"Well, I know you weren't expecting Megatron to haul you into his berth and then keep you for the night, so how were you really going to get away? What was the great escape's Plan A?"

"More like plan Z and a half, by now," Jazz mumbled. "I was going to keel over from a sudden cramp in the fuel tank. Soundwave would blame the energon treats from Mixmaster and take me straight to the Constructicon medbay, just before the rain set in. While we were stuck there, he'd get served the same drugged energon Hoist and Grapple were giving to the rest of the gestalt. I'd take their shuttle to HQ and bring unconscious Laserbeak with me, just in case any of the other cassettes noticed he'd gone down and came poking around."

"Smart plan."

"Thank you it was," Jazz sniffed. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason." But the music had changed while Jazz was talking, and Blaster was listening intently to it. TAKE ME HOME TONIGHT, I DON'T WANNA LET YOU GO 'TIL YOU SEE THE LIGHT! TAKE ME HOME-

"Oh my sweet Primus," Blaster whispered, optics dilating wide and fixing their shocked stare on Jazz. "You wanted to take Soundwave."

"Wh- no I didn't!"

"Eddie Money don't lie," Blaster said matter-of-factly. "You wanted to take him with you after it all went down; you thought you'd take him over to the Autobot side - him and his whole entourage. You wanted him to defect, get hired by the Bots to fill my spot, and then you and all his team could live together: one big happy family."

Stunned, Soundwave stared at Jazz, who was leaning back into his palms with his most nonchalant of poses. "That's the dumbest theory I've heard all week, Jukebox. You know commitment is not my style. You see, I'm a cowboy. On a steel horse I -"

"Don't you try to Bon Jovi me, mister! I *invented* Bon Jovi. And you, you wanted to keep Soundwave. When did that happen?"

Quite clearly against Jazz's will, the music changed again. OH WHAT A NIGHT! HYPNOTIZING, MESMERIZING ME; SHE WAS EVERYTHING I DREAMED SHE'D BE. SWEET SURRENDER, WHAT A NIGHT!

"The night of the party," Blaster realized, nodding to himself and pretending not to see the horrified look on Jazz's face. "Makes sense. All your friends turned against you, you were humiliated and



alone. And there was good ol' Soundwave, solid as a rock, telling you things like 'Soundwave yours'. That's the night the game got real. You stopped calling him 'my love' because it wasn't really a joke anymore, was it? Did you fall in love with him?"

"I don't love *anyone!*" Jazz snarled, leaping to his pedes and looming dangerously close to Blaster. Unfazed, Blaster didn't twitch. "I use them. And when I'm done, I walk out the door - no thank yous no goodbyes. Like tonight, you might notice. Whatever you think you hear in that music, you have to admit I was *not* taking Soundwave with me."

"Good point. What made you change your mind?" Soundwave was learning to appreciate Blaster's technique. Every direct question provoked a new change in the music, before Jazz even had a chance to open his mouth. MASTER OF PUPPETS, I'M PULLING YOUR STRINGS! TWISTING YOUR MIND AND SMASHING YOUR DREAMS. BLINDED BY ME, YOU CAN'T SEE A THING; JUST CALL MY NAME 'CAUSE I'LL HEAR YOU SCREAM.

"So it was Megatron," Blaster translated. "After what he did to the both of you, you were too angry to even think about it."

"And why shouldn't I be angry? Soundwave led me by the hand into the lion's den, watched him rape me, and did nothing!"

"Oh c'mon, Jazz. You're not even close to that stupid, that you think Soundwave could defy Megatron like that. Interesting that you got so angry, though. You got triple fucked by the seekers for years, and you don't care. You're even ready to leave the planet in Starscream's hands. Why is it different for Soundwave?"

KIBOU NI MICHITA ZETSUBOTO WANA GA SHIKAKERARETERU KONO CHANSU.  
NANI GA YOKUTE WARUI NO KA? KOIN NO OMOI TO KURAMITAITA.

"Japanese jazz, clever, but that's okay, I still get it. It's because you trusted him, you let him in. Soundwave got further to knowing the real you than any mech ever has, and your reward was a threesome with Megatron."

"It's really great that you're telling me all this," Jazz said tersely, "like I didn't just live it."

"You're angry with Soundwave because you love Soundwave. You're hurt. But you won't admit it because that would be admitting that the untouchably callous Jazz can be hurt after all, and then you might actually be just like the rest of us."

"I am not like *anyone*."

"And thank Primus for that. But there just might be hope for the universe after all. It's weird, right? To be part of a family? They love, and trust each other. They'd never part with each other, and they're okay with that. I think you learned to like being part of the family."

"I don't need to hear this shit," Jazz snapped, his patience gone. "Where's Optimus, anyway? I want to see him. Optimus!" Jazz whirled around and started calling into the dark, but Blaster just sighed.

"You can't, Jazz, he's not here. He is, as they say, one with the Matrix. And he just found a new recruit."

"Ugh, don't remind me. Speaking of fumbling in the dark."

"I think he's cute. In a puppyish sort of way."

“The Autobots don’t need a puppy, B.”

“Do you think Optimus was already the wise and fearless leader we know when he first put his hands on that Christmas ornament?” He paused when that comment kicked up new music in Jazz’s mind. WHAT CHILD IS THIS, WHO LAID TO REST, THAT I NOW FIND HERE SLEEPING? DO ANGELS KEEP THE DREAMS WE SEEK, WHILE OUR HEARTS LIE BLEEDING? “I get it now, why the Matrix chooses the way it does. It doesn’t look for power, power it’s already got. It looks for kindness. That’s why it rejected Megatron, and that’s why it practically jumped into the hands of that kid. Can’t add two and two, I know, but he’s got a good spark. Only wants to do the right thing - sorta like someone else we know.”

TELL ME HOW MANY TIMES CAN THIS STORY BE TOLD? AFTER ALL OF THESE YEARS IT SHOULD ALL SOUND SO OLD, BUT IT SOMEHOW RINGS TRUE IN THE BACK OF MY MIND, AS I SEARCH FOR A DREAM THAT WORDS CAN NO LONGER DEFINE.

Jazz had gone quiet, but for the music, arms wrapped around himself in an unusual display of vulnerability. Blaster lowered his voice. “You really cared about Optimus, didn’t you? So much for the use-em-and-lose-em lifestyle. It was his relentless speechifying about freedom, I know, that’s what had you hooked. You might not think you’re very good, Jazz, but you are good at finding good people. Is there that much difference from committing yourself to Optimus, than to a family?”

“Yes,” Jazz snarled, raw anger flashing across his visor. “Yes if that family thinks they own you! If every day you have to stay trapped in those walls while they can go in and out, they never let you alone, never let you have a life - or a future. If that’s what it means to be in a ‘family’, then count me out.”

“Of course that’s not what it means,” Blaster said mildly. “Soundwave’s just a little more fucked up than the rest of us. He has a hard time letting go - like right now, for instance. He’s fighting to hold you back from death while he lies unconscious in the middle of that battle you just left.”

That took Jazz by surprise, and he looked at Soundwave in spite of himself. “You’re lucky Ironhide hasn’t put a shot right through your head. The second he notices you, he will.”

“This risk, known,” Soundwave admitted. “Jazz, more important.”

“Hey, see that?” Blaster said quickly. “Hmm? That’s good, right? See how much he cares?”

Jazz hesitated, then just shrugged again. “We all know Soundwave will go the ends of the universe for his ‘things’. Color me unimpressed.”

A hard look crossed Blaster’s optics, and he frowned. “Jazz, you have many charms. Your arrogance is not one of them. You have two mechs here, one dead and the other very likely to join him, trying to save your life and all you can do is act like you don’t care.”

“Because I don’t.”

“I think you wish you didn’t. But the truth is that you’re terrified of Soundwave - what he feels for you and what you feel for him. It scares you so much that you’ll run and hide in *death* rather than face up to it. It’s all right there in the Paul Simon!”

“Shut up, just shut up!” Jazz pleaded, backing away from Blaster. “I can’t listen to this anymore!”

“I saw you, Jazz.” Relentlessly Blaster closed the distance Jazz was trying to put between them. “I watched you tell Soundwave that my cassettibots made the wrong choice, you told him they should

have picked life. You were right, but did you mean it? Cuz now's your chance and you are refusing to take it. Step up! Make the choice that they didn't and *live*."

In the face of Blaster's blazing determination, Jazz wilted. Blue light waned, and his shoulders sagged as if the world had just dropped onto them. "I'm tired, Jukebox. It's been such a long lifetime. I don't think I have the energy for any more."

"What? What kind of talk is that - what about the Autobots? They need you."

"They have their 'savior' again."

"Yeah, and how many times did you save his life tonight? He'll need you; he'll be lost without you."

"I can't," Jazz croaked. "I can't do it, and fend him off too. I'm not strong enough. I can't play the game anymore."

"So... we just make Soundwave promise to leave you alone."

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE, EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE. EVERY BOND YOU BREAK, EVERY STEP YOU TAKE, I'LL BE WATCHING YOU.

"You're right," Blaster sighed, "he won't." Warily he tipped back and looked at Soundwave in a resigned sort of way. "I guess this is where the unstoppable force bangs up against the unmovable object. Jazz won't live unless you let him go, and you could no more do that than stop living."

While he talked he wandered back over to Soundwave until he was facing him directly, arms crossed. "I know better than most what drives you, Soundwave. We were cut from the same code after all."

"Blaster understands demands of core programming," Soundwave pleaded. "Our kind, built to protect and nurture, not to abandon."

"I do. But somehow I managed to make it work, living with the Autobots. Somehow I managed to have relationships that didn't involve me chaining my berth buddies to the actual berth. So you can't blame it all on the code. Seriously, mech, what's wrong with you? Is it because you spent half your life following a mech like Megatron? He looks at the galaxy and sees nothing wrong with the idea of conquering it. But you know better. We adopt our cassettes because they want us to, and when we do, they don't 'serve' us; we work together. Megatron likes to hurt what he owns - you've watched him do it for a thousand vorns. But we don't hurt our symbiotes, we don't hurt what we *love*."

All this repeated mention of Megatron was tugging at Soundwave's already strained loyalty protocols. Again he thought of the battle he'd left behind, leaving Megatron alone to face the entire Autobot army.

"Battle, still ongoing?"

"It's only been a few astrosecs. Time passes... kinda differently here on the edge of the Well."

"Megatron, alive?"

Blaster hadn't even had a chance to open his mouth before Soundwave was blindsided on the right, Jazz's whole weight slamming into him and fists railing against his armor plating everywhere at once.

"I can't *believe* you," he snarled. "After everything he did to me! After everything he's ever done to you, you can still bother to care about that *thing* - that, that toxic cancer on this galaxy! He's done nothing but use you!"

"Megatron, my leader," Soundwave protested, backing out from under the assault.

"Is that why he dragged you into his berth, why he raped you for no other reason than to *show off*?"

"And you tried to protect him," Blaster murmured.

"I felt sorry for him! I've only been Megatron's slave for six years, but he's had a leash around Soundwave's neck for most of his lifetime. He won't fight back, he won't defend himself. He'll just keep working all his days to keep Megatron's empire running, unthanked, doing everything he can to support the mech who does not love him back!"

Blaster's gaze snapped back to Jazz with laserlike focus. "What?"

"Nothing!" But some new music was blaring overhead and Blaster hadn't missed that either.

"Megatron is the mech who does not love Soundwave back," he repeated carefully. "Are you the mech that does?"

Haughtily Jazz crossed his arms and looked away. "*If* I did, it'd be nothing but a waste of energy for a mech who'd rather kneel to Megatron on broken glass. He'd never leave him, not even to save his own life."

Soundwave stiffened and Blaster, who'd spent his whole career squaring off against Soundwave at the negotiating table, saw it. "Soundwave? What is it?"

"Soundwave... strongly dismayed by Megatron's actions earlier. After returning home, Soundwave -" His vocalizer hitched and he had to reboot it. "- momentarily contemplated departure from Megatron's rule."

Blaster's mouth fell open. "Shut the front door. That must have given you a fragging stroke!"

"Affirmative," Soundwave said simply, sneaking a quick look at Jazz while he did. Jazz was staring at him, visor a blank pale blue, and he couldn't read anything about that expression. He wished he knew the meaning of the new music around them, and was going to ask Blaster but Blaster beat him.

"So, what does this mean? Are you, like, ready to quit the Decepticons?"

Again his loyalty protocols twinged, and reflexively Soundwave put a hand to his chest. But there was no cascading failure this time, no imminent blackout. Perhaps because he wasn't technically in his own body, he was avoiding the operating code crash.

"Blaster, Megatron alive?"

"It just so happens that I know, but I'm not going to tell you." Briefly Blaster smirked. "Why should I make it easy for you? Jazz doesn't want to know that you're ready to leave Megatron only if he's dead. It's time to decide, Soundwave: will it be Jazz or Megatron? You can't walk the middle path anymore."

"Blaster knows loyalty coding," Soundwave reminded him rather desperately. "Soundwave, served Megatron for so long; bond cannot be broken."

“You’ve spent the last year telling Jazz that he has to give up on his life and belong to you. What’s the difference?”

Without warning he snagged Soundwave by the edge of his plating and pulled him close, dropping his voice to a whisper. “I meant what I said in the dream, Soundwave. He’ll never be yours. He won’t stand to be ‘yours’. But he could be *with* you, free and equal, if you could just bend yourself enough to try. It’d have worked on my bots if you’d tried, but you didn’t, so here we go again. You said you’d do anything to save Jazz - anything. Did you mean it? Or were you lying for the first time in your life?”

He released Soundwave with a small shove that sent Soundwave stumbling, and again he looked back to Jazz. Still he was staring. Soundwave took a cautious step toward him, but the only response was for Jazz to back hastily away.

“It comes,” he said slowly, “to this: Jazz must choose between death and life. Jazz, wants to live?”

Fresh music began to play, and Blaster opened his mouth to translate. “He wants -” Soundwave held up a hand, no longer interested in interrogation. This time it was his turn to speak.

“Jazz, will only choose life if Soundwave chooses Jazz over Megatron. And such a choice, impossible. This much considered: Soundwave never understood your difficulty in losing freedom. Now, this difficulty understood.” He reached for Jazz but Jazz flinched backward, and Soundwave’s spark ached to see it.

“Please.”

That got his visor to flare even whiter with surprise; Soundwave had never said *please* to him before. He didn’t say it to anyone in his household. “The future, not known. Megatron’s survival, uncertain. But whatever happens, understand this: Jazz... not mine.”

“Wh-what?”

“Jazz, must live. And so, Soundwave must choose Jazz, not Megatron. Without Megatron, Jazz will have freedom; therefore, Jazz will choose life. This conclusion, only logical. However...”

His hand was trembling slightly when he held it out to Jazz again, not in command, only invitation. “If Jazz will- will choose to be with me, then your company gratefully accepted.”

He couldn’t tell whether Jazz looked ready to fall over or just fall to pieces. He just kept staring, so stunned, and Soundwave did not think there was any more he could say. A new song began, and off to his side he heard the soft surprised hitch in Blaster’s ventilations.

SO WHEN YOU SENSE A CHANGE, NOTHING FEELS THE SAME. ALL YOUR DREAMS ARE STRANGE; LOVE COMES WALKIN’ IN. SOME KIND OF ALIEN WAITS FOR THE OPENING, THEN SIMPLY PULLS A STRING; LOVE COMES WALKIN’ IN.

Jazz’s hand dropped into his, light as ash, the mere contact sending crackles of electricity straight up Soundwave’s arm and into his spark. As if it were the most natural thing in the world Jazz spun into the crease of his arm and up against his chest plating. “B always did love Van Halen the most,” he murmured.

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Soundwave woke up into the darkness, rain still thrumming against the shattered remains of Decepticon Command but no more sounds of battle. He was still where he'd dropped off from reality, lying unnoticed in the shadows, Jazz cradled in his arms. He was still unconscious, visor black, but now Soundwave could feel the unmistakeable rhythm of his spark spinning steadily - if slowly - in its chamber.

He did not let himself look at anything else. He only sliced into the Autobots' comm channel, easy enough task for a signals expert tracking a group no longer trying to hide. He broadcast his position and Jazz's status, then waited. It was not a long wait.

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters

## on the end

Soundwave unshuttered his optics to see a rust-streaked ceiling, same as the seven cycles before that. It was old metal, its paint long since scraped away, heavily oxidized by the humid and salty air pumping through vents. The look of it was very familiar to Soundwave, having spent so many years working down here. There was a strange symmetry to it, being back on the *Nemesis* after all this time, locked up as a prisoner in its brig. It should have collapsed years ago, Scrapper had assured them all, crumpled under the weight of the ocean sometime after the Decepticons had moved to their new base in Arabia. But the Autobots did have a very creative engineer, and it was of course the one place Megatron would have never looked. One missile would have been enough to destroy all of it, if only the Decepticons had known. And then everything would have ended very differently. He shuttered his optics again.

*Acid rain dribbled through the shredded walls, pooling dangerously close around Soundwave, but he didn't dare stand - didn't dare make any move at all. He just hugged Jazz closer to his chest, trying to ensure none of his plating touched the floor. Three large rifle barrels were currently aimed at his head, hostile blue optics at the other end of each, and the only reason no triggers had yet been pulled was Jazz himself.*

*"Jazz, severely injured," he pleaded. "Immediate medical attention required."*

*"Set him down then," Prowl ordered crisply. "Slowly. And back away."*

*Soundwave shook his head. "This, not possible." He tried not to flinch at the sound of Ironhide's trigger easing into position. "Soundwave, keeping Jazz alive. Separation may result in termination."*

*"That a threat, Con?" drawled Ironhide.*

*"Sounds more like a desperate bargain to me," Prowl evaluated. "First Aid?"*

*There were more Autobots there now, all of them actually, grim shadowy figures filtering into the ruined room and surrounding him. Soundwave kept his gaze forward, while the Protectobot knelt and checked for Jazz's vitals.*

*"He's right that Jazz is alive... I don't know how, with a shotwound like that, but he is. I can feel his spark spinning."*

*"And the rest of it?"*

*First Aid hesitated, and looked from Jazz to Soundwave, who returned his stare impassively. The light behind his blue visor was wan and exhausted, but there was a sureness there too. He'd grown, sometime since their last encounter. "If Soundwave says he's keeping Jazz alive, then he is. We should get them both on the shuttle."*

*Ironhide started to protest, but Prowl cut him off neatly. "On your pedes then, and do it slowly. Make any unexpected motion, and we will certainly kill you. Do you understand?"*

*"Understood." Cautiously he pushed himself to standing, no easy task while cradling the weight of Jazz in his arms and trying very hard not to jostle him. "However, request made."*

*"Really."*

*“This much asked: that Autobots reroute to provided coordinates before departing city, and take symbiotes prisoner too.”*

*“Is that all? Anything else we may do for you?”*

*“If symbiotes left behind, they will come,” Soundwave assured Prowl. “They will follow me, find your location, and attack. Autobots, best served by taking them captive.”*

*“And you would tell us this, why?”*

*“Because Soundwave, done fighting. This, my surrender.”*

He'd said nothing more, but that was enough. Prowl judged his logic and thankfully, concluded that it was worth their time to stop by Soundwave's home and take his four very surprised symbiotes prisoner, before leaving the ruins of Iacon behind them. Soundwave had done exactly as ordered, carrying Jazz up and out of the headquarters and into their escape shuttle, a gun barrel pricking him in the back of the head all the while. He would not let himself look at anything else, didn't dare peer into the shadows lest he see something that might break him completely. He'd only dimmed his optics and concentrated on finding safe footing wherever he stepped. He was not allowed to dock his cassettes or even speak to them. The spacebridge swallowed their transport whole, leaving Cybertron behind, after which he heard a tremendous explosion that could only be Earth's end of the bridge blowing up.

That was all over an orn ago, or to be more correct, one week of Earth time. After First Aid had Jazz hooked into some proper life support systems in the old medbay, he'd been shoved into the brig and mostly ignored ever since. He was the only occupant; the individual cell bars were not activated, probably because the ship couldn't spare the energy. They'd chained him to the wall instead. His cassettes were kept elsewhere, separate from him and separate from each other, and after a week of it he could feel they were close to boiling over with anger and fear. To say nothing of Laserbeak, recovering from her injuries. Twice First Aid had entered the cellblock, and asked him a few very specific and pointed questions about her physiology while a glowering Ironhide kept guard. By this Soundwave cautiously presumed she was being given medical attention. That and the longstanding knowledge that Autobots did not execute prisoners were all he had to cling to, since they no longer had any reason to keep him alive, and he didn't dare ask for more. He ached to dock his cassettes, though. He wanted to hold them close, comfort them, explain away their confusion. Mostly he just missed them. Soundwave was alone, lost in the wake of his empire's destruction, and his kind was not meant to be alone.

At the end of the hall, the door banged open. Not enough hours since they'd last brought fuel; this was something different. Soundwave unshuttered his optics again and scrambled to stand, expecting First Aid and Ironhide again, hopeful for news of his symbiote's recovery. So he was quite taken aback when young Hot Rod himself marched into the cell, Prowl unhappily trailing him.

“Is it true?” he demanded, hands on hips. “About your cassette things? Will they die if they're kept away from you for too long?”

“Affirmative,” he answered promptly, without stopping to clarify just what ‘too long’ really meant here. Vorns, maybe.

“Why didn't you say anything?”

“Soundwave, in no position to make demands.”



“Well I’m not gonna let a bunch of tiny bots die just because they’re in a different room,” he announced to everyone present. “We’ll rotate them in here one at a time, each for a cycle - or whatever it is on this planet.”

“Sir,” Prowl spoke up, the civility of the address clearly strained to the breaking point. “Again I must advise caution. You are looking at one of the most dangerous Decepticons in the galaxy, and I can think of three separate reasons why it would be unwise to -”

“I dunno why you guys are so hung up on this thing in my chest, if you won’t ever listen to me while I’m listening to it.” Impatiently Hot Rod thumped his armor plating with a huff. “It’s the right thing to do, Mr. Prowl. So we do it.”

Prowl dimmed his optics wearily. “Yes, Prime. I’ll arrange a schedule.”

“I told you, just Hot Rod. Or... Rodimus, I guess, if you want.” Cheerfully he clapped his hand on Prowl’s shoulder, who could only sigh. Soundwave watched the exchange and activated his vocalizer again.

“Soundwave, pleased by Jazz’s recovery.”

“Yeah, me too. I wasn’t so sure at first, but he’s sitting up now and- oh, wait. How did you know?” By his side, Prowl looked beyond exasperated, and Soundwave was tempted to smirk at him.

“Only Jazz would have told you cassettes require synchronization. His convalescence, welcome news.”

“You do not get to see him,” Prowl said sharply, “before you waste your time asking.”

“Perhaps new Prime will think otherwise.”

“Umm.” Uneasily Hot Rod looked from him to the brittle coldness in Prowl’s optics. “I think we’ll just leave it at the cassette guys for now. Okay? Let us know if you need anything else.”

On that rather absurd remark, he grinned at Soundwave and departed, leaving Prowl to fix him with one last icy stare. “The naivete, charming though it may be, will not last forever. Sometime soon he is going to remember that you tried to kill him the night you met, and perhaps then we will reconsider the value of your presence here. Wait for it.”

“This task, accepted. Soundwave, very patient.”

Prowl marched out of the brig, his steps small and brisk, and Soundwave waited until he was gone to sink back to the cold floor. Autobots had never threatened to kill a prisoner before. He wondered if by saving Jazz, he’d doomed himself.

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Another seven Earth days came and went. True to the young Prime’s word, the Autobots escorted one symbiote to his cell at the time of his refueling, each of them in turn. Laserbeak was first, still a pitiful picture trussed up in splints and braces. It seemed there was no time she had not been injured for orns now, and it was she that Soundwave was most desperate to dock. They had to be content

with just cuddling and petting, and of course, explanations. He owed all of them so much explanation, and five times over he had to tell the story. How he found Jazz, and then Hot Rod.

What Jazz had done to Laserbeak, how much more he'd threatened to do, the shocking revelation by the Matrix, Jazz's death and the miraculous undoing of it. His cassettes were near unanimous that he shouldn't have bothered.

Not at all to Soundwave's surprise, they were furious with Jazz, their bitter hurt palpable through symbiotic links. They felt betrayed, which Soundwave could well understand, and he did not try to reason them out of it. He just held them, let them spit their angry invective and threats, and when they were done docked them so they might find true rest and peace from a frightening new world.

Not Laserbeak, though. She had no anger, just crushing despair. She had loved Jazz with her whole spark and nearly died by his hand. It was a wound that might never heal.

In the night hours of the seventh day, Soundwave unshuttered his optics again. Something had roused him from his recharge - a sound, maybe, or something he'd felt. Nothing so noisy as a door banging open, but now that he was listening he could hear the soft scuffles of someone moving into the cell. Frenzy wasn't the cause, dozing on his chest. Immediately he dialed his visor up to its brightest gain and found Jazz, cautiously using his crutch as a brace to settle himself on the floor.

When he saw Soundwave was awake, he slipped him a small smile.

"Hi."

Soundwave shot upright and Frenzy fell into his lap with a squawk. He opened his mouth to complain, then saw the reason, and his optics blazed furiously. "*You!*" he snarled. And he would have elaborated on that word in so many creative, vituperative ways, but Soundwave was already opening his chest.

"Frenzy, return now."

"But -"

"Now!" He let all his fear and anxiety flood into the link, knowing Frenzy would assume it pertained to his own safety, which wasn't completely untrue. Unhappily Frenzy swallowed back his tirade, glaring spitefully at Jazz, then folded up and slotted into Soundwave's chest. Jazz said absolutely nothing while this took place, chin on one drawn up knee and watching Frenzy in silence. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Soundwave stowed his symbiote away, returning the dim cell to silence, but once this deed was done he had no idea what to say. Jazz had always started their conversations, but now he was just sitting and watching him so quietly, face a perfect blank. For the first time since he'd come here, it occurred to Soundwave to wonder if Jazz even remembered their strange encounter with Blaster. Did it even really happen? If only Jazz would speak. There was something wrong about the way he looked, too, but Soundwave couldn't quite place it. Maybe it was the welds marking his injuries, still fresh and criss-crossing his torso in abundance. When he saw Soundwave looking at them, he traced his thumb lightly down the path of one.

"He's dead, you know."

Startled, Soundwave looked back to Jazz's gaze. It was somber, not gleeful the way he would have expected with such an announcement, but he had no doubt whom Jazz meant. Stiffly he nodded.

"Yes."

"Are you okay?"

“Soundwave... attempting to not think about it. Attempting to not contemplate this loss in leadership, or how life has been changed forever for Soundwave, and symbiotes. Attempting very hard. But this task -” Soundwave had to stop and reboot his vocalizer. “-difficult.”

His hands had begun to tremble again, just like every time in the past fourteen days he'd shoved these thoughts away. Megatron was dead. The mech he'd served for most of his lifetime was gone, and his absence gaped like a dark wound in Soundwave's spark. Somehow, by virtue of never hearing it aloud, he'd managed to keep himself in some level of floating denial. But now Jazz had come, and Jazz was telling him, and the truth couldn't be avoided anymore.

“So many vorns, in his service. Soundwave... unsure of direction to take, now. Everything that was known - gone.” Ancient loyalty protocols cramped and he convulsed at the sudden pain, for one second thinking himself on the brink of another faint. But this time Jazz's arms caught him before he could tip forward, hugging him with a strength Soundwave wouldn't have expected considering those welds.

“I know exactly how you feel,” Jazz whispered into his audio. “And you're going to be alright. You're going to survive this, and you'll be better in the end. You're all going to be just fine.” The engine in his chest kicked up a soft, comforting purr, something Soundwave associated with more pleasant memories, and his hand rubbed gentle circles across his back.

“Soundwave, lost.”

“You won't be for long. I won't let you. ‘Soundwave mine’, right?” His wheezing ventilations hiccuped with surprise, and he heard a low chuckle. “D'you think he can see us, right now? D'you think he's watching?”

“Jazz, remembers?”

“Sure do. Not every day I meet one of my best friends on the wrong side of the grave. I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye... but it's okay. I think he got what he wanted.” He pulled back a fraction, just enough that it would have been an ideal position for a kiss, but hardly had the idea entered Soundwave's head when the door to the brig banged open.

“Busted,” sighed Jazz, and settled himself back against the wall. Soon enough Prowl was looming over them, those door panels of his held high and stiff with anger. Languidly Jazz grinned up at him.

“Hey good lookin'. Come here often?”

“Do not even,” Prowl said curtly. “You will get away from him, now.”

“Shouldn't strain your vents, Prowler. Soundwave won't hurt me; he saved my life.”

“He saw which way the battle was going and used you to bargain for the safety of himself and his team. It was shrewd but hardly generous.”

“Didja now?” Jazz flashed Soundwave an approving glance. “Not bad. Next you might even learn how to lie.”

“That task, best left to you.”

“Are you quite through?” Prowl asked impatiently.

“No. How long do you expect to keep Soundwave and his team locked down here? We can't afford to feed six mouths.”

"I know. Taking prisoners was not part of the plan *for a reason*."

"Course, it'd be a different matter if he was allowed to contribute..."

"No. Do not say it - I *forbid* you to say it."

"We need a comms officer, Prowl. And he's the best to be had."

"No, Jazz. We need a comms officer. We do not need a telepathic Decepticon and his five spies loose in the base, around traumatized Autobots that still can't recharge through a full cycle. Do you expect to sit Bluestreak next to him in a meeting? Shall we put him in a room next to Sunstreaker?"

Jazz tipped his head back against the wall, looking resigned. "Didn't miss how good you are at winning arguments. You're right; Soundwave can't be here. So, we'll go."

"Wh-what?"

"When Aid gives me the all-clear, I'll take him and we'll go. We'll leave the base, his cassettes too."

"Jazz, you belong -"

"Say it, Prowl," Jazz warned, a dangerous sharp edge to the words. "Say that I 'belong' to the Autobots."

The light in his visor narrowed at Prowl and that's when Soundwave realized what had been bothering him about Jazz's appearance. Prowl was bearing the Autobot brand on his chest. First Aid was too, the sigil newly repainted since his escape. But there was nothing on Jazz's chest; he hadn't repainted it.

Prowl was biting back a response, and tried again more diplomatically. "You belong *with* us, Jazz. You carried this mission; you engineered the escape of every imprisoned Autobot on Cybertron."

"Some of whom are still shootin' some unhappy looks at me when they think I don't see. Don't bother denying it; I know what you've heard. They need time, Prowler. I need time. And you need someone out there, keeping tabs on our new human allies, watching for trouble. I'm good at that and so is Soundwave's team. So I'll go, and I'll take them with me."

"You are in no position to decide you can simply 'take' any prisoners outside of this base."

"Say no and I'll just break them out."

"What?"

"I'm good at it," Jazz assured him, and tilted his head toward Soundwave. "Ask him if you don't believe me. We'll go, and we'll come back when the Autobots are good and ready to have us."

"Jazz," Prowl tried again, and Soundwave could see he was exercising extreme patience. Gratifying, to know he was not the only one who'd ever dealt with Jazz when he was like this. "You have just spent the last year doing everything that you could to escape this mech. You don't have to do anything for him."

"You're right, I don't!" His visor lit up with bright blue happiness at the very notion of it, smile spreading wide. "And that's what makes me want to."

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Seven months later marked the day the cassettes - most of them - forgave Jazz. It had not been a quick road. The day they all left the *Nemesis* Rumble and Frenzy had loudly, forcefully, *violently* explained their feelings to Jazz and informed him they would never in the lifetime of this galaxy forgive him for what he'd done. To which Jazz, mildly enough, replied that he wouldn't have to change their minds. It sounded arrogant, as so many things out of Jazz's mouth did, but as the weeks stretched into months Soundwave came to understand what Jazz meant. The mission was merely low-key scouting and surveillance, tasks his cassettes had been built for, and without the stress of holding together a disintegrated empire their innate enthusiasm for the work resurfaced. They loved Earth and loved being back on it, relishing their chance to spy and explore without the boring chores like monitor duty or taking minutes. And they also, as Jazz reminded Soundwave, loved him - had always loved him more than Megatron or the Decepticon cause. In the end it didn't matter to them at all where they worked or what they did, so long as they could be safe and together.

As promised, Jazz kept his distance from them, never tried to touch one of them or speak unless spoken to. He just let the languid days and plentiful sunshine do its work, until the day came that Rumble found a dead rat and threw it square at Jazz's windshield. Jazz said that as far as truces go, the twins had a language far more mysterious than his own music files. And still later that night, after they'd managed to get cleaned off, Laserbeak allowed him to pet her wings.

Monsoons had been moving through the area, but the next day dawned warm and clear. Soundwave was standing on a beach, somewhere on the Australian coast, the endless blue sky now doubled by the ocean before him. It would be a tranquil, serene moment if not for the music thumping from Jazz's powerful new speakers, which he somehow managed to play even louder than the roar of his own engine. Sand sprayed out from under his tires as he tore down the beach, occasionally drifting on purpose through the surf to throw up a wall of water. Soundwave could hear the whoops of delight from the ridehitching twins, Laserbeak and Buzzsaw soaring overhead. Ravage was further inland on a side mission - still many years to come before he would ever forgive. This bothered neither Soundwave nor Jazz, so long as he wasn't actively engaged in slaughtering Jazz and still willing to dock within Soundwave. Inevitably, he would come around.

Soundwave tilted his head further back, considering what was on the other side of all that blue. Not long now before Starscream would be in range, because inevitably he would be coming around too. Cybertron needed fuel and Earth had it, in spades. Prowl and Rodimus had been busy working with the new human government, negotiating how much fuel could be set aside for parley. Soundwave was inclined to think Starscream would take it. He'd always been his most irrational where Megatron was concerned, but faced with actual leadership, a reduced army, and his own passion for the future of science, he would probably choose trade over war. Especially if it was Skyfire who met him at the bargaining table. Should he decide he wanted a fight after all, Jazz and Soundwave's reconnaissance work had laid more than enough groundwork for one that would end in their favor. Jazz was right about this much too: Megatron was gone now, but Soundwave still had purpose, his family and worthwhile work. So far from his home, but surrounded by everything that mattered most, Soundwave was no longer lost.

The music had dwindled, and Jazz was no longer in sight. Soundwave didn't mind. Because he knew, as well as he knew anything in this world, that Jazz would come back. As long as Soundwave waited, he would always come back.

## THE END

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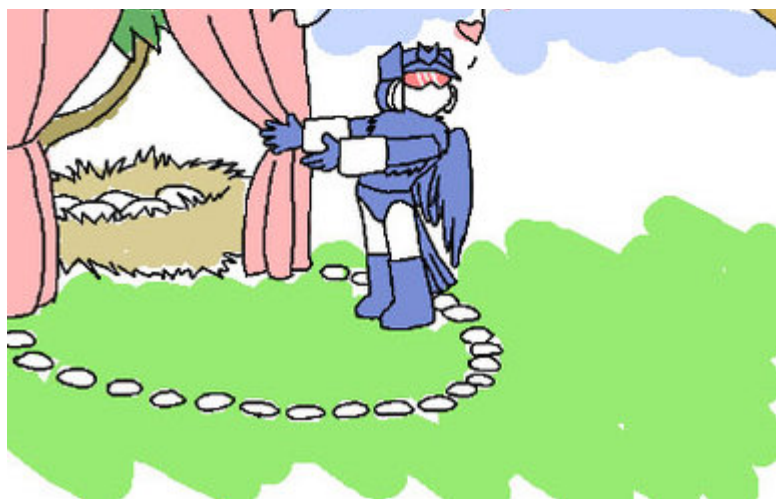
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Stay tuned for the author's afterword next week!

Birdies, by Merrypaw









## on afterwords

G1: Decepticons win. Autobot survivors are scattered. One day, Soundwave is off-duty at a bar-esque establishment. Some minor 'Cons and Neutrals are playing the Cybertronian equivalent of a high-stakes card game for a battered, chained up Jazz. Soundwave includes himself in the game.

Kinks: Cue Soundwave getting an Autobot! I want a twisted courtship and power imbalance. Soundwave tries to win Jazz over, shines him, gives him treats, and generally pampers him. Soundwave is patient: he won't force Jazz, because he knows Jazz will soon see things his way. He's not above giving Jazz a taste of things to come, either, and gives him massages, teases him, and admires Jazz with his hands. Jazz is a tough, noble Autobot and resists giving the interfacing Soundwave wants. But he's still very trapped, and has to cater to Soundwave's lesser whims, like including when Soundwave wants to be pampered in return, or be punished. Jazz can eventually give in completely, or hold out.

### In the beginning

It all started with the words of this challenge, which, hilariously enough, had been accidentally entered into the wrong part of Livejournal's kinkmeme. The requestor put them in the thread of fic responses instead of the thread of challenges, which is the only reason I ever saw it. I wasn't looking to write anything new - I'd just finished another monster fic in a different fandom, was new to Transformers, and was only interested in reading. But then I saw this, and somehow my mind could not unsee it. Days later, images were still sneaking into my brain: images of the lively and cunning Jazz being forced to kneel to stoic Soundwave, eating from his hand, bathing and polishing him but never ever being forced into sex - because Soundwave is just that confident that he won't have to.

I like stories that feature battles of wills, especially with two highly intelligent characters squaring off against each other. I also, incidentally, like Soundwave. I like him a lot. He was my favorite character when I was a kid, with that sexy menacing monotone that only Frank Welker can pull off, and still sends shivers up my spine when I hear it. I also liked Jazz, though I was nowhere near as emotionally attached to him, and had only just been getting to know him better as I started to read the treasure trove of fanfic that is the TF fandom. Though they are not a common pairing (and were even less so in 2009), it suddenly seemed very obvious to me that these two were made to spar each other and maybe - just maybe, if the author did it right - could click with each other too.

So I figured - fine, I'm hooked. I'll do it. But it'll be a quick, mindless pornfic and I'll be done with it in a few months.

If there's one thing I've learned about myself since I started learning to write, it's that I'm a marvelous liar, especially when it comes to lying to myself. I suppose if I were ever honest with myself about how long a story is going to be, I'd probably run screaming from the idea and never start them. So here I am, 8 years later, finally wrapping it all up and sighing a gigantic sigh of relief. Do you realize that if I'd had a baby that day instead of deciding to write this, that baby would now be entering second grade? EEK. I am not a motherly sort of person. Luckily for everyone involved, I decided to just write the story.

## **Did you always know the ending?**

Nope, not even a little. Since I had just lied to myself and told myself that this was going to be a mindless pornfic, I didn't sweat too many of the details before I dove in. All I did know was that the story began some years after the end of the war, that Jazz was already enslaved to someone else, and that Soundwave decided he wanted to take him home. That begged the obvious question - why doesn't Soundwave, so influential and valued by his leader, already have an Autobot? So I answered that question by coming up with the cassettibot backstory. That in turn fed itself into bigger themes for the story, such as Soundwave's determination to force someone to love him, and the ultimate futility of such a goal. Which I then reflected back onto Megatron trying to lead a peacetime government and trying to force the population to love him, and so on. Like dominoes, it all fell into place.

As far as Jazz's side of the story, mostly. I already knew when I started writing that I would have Jazz break free, because that's what I do - I write about freedom. For me, a story about slavery is just an excuse to write about emancipation. I'd written through several chapters before I came up with the idea of using Hound to feed a misleading video to Megatron, which of course would have to feature Starscream - he was the obvious red herring. It took me a while longer to figure out the specifics of exactly what it was Laserbeak would 'see', which led me to having a fight with the Insecticons on Earth.

## **So is Jazz able to predict the future, or what?**

It's been justly noted by a few readers that things were only able to play out the way they did because luck fell in Jazz's favor. True, yes, and the Everything Wrong With guy on Youtube could probably have a field day with my story. But I want to stress that Jazz wasn't always lucky, wasn't even lucky most of the time. It's just that when he *wasn't* lucky, the Decepticons didn't notice. For years, while living with Starscream, Jazz was throwing one grenade after another into the empire's politics but not getting any significant booms for his efforts. Getting a minute alone with the Combaticons to whisper Hound's name wasn't a plan he'd been waiting for years to execute, it was just an opportunity and he seized it. Stealing one of Soundwave's cameras and giving it to Perceptor to plant in the seeker's home was another grenade, but it took Starscream so long to find it that that grenade almost didn't go off either. When it did, it was Jazz's hope that Starscream would actually shoot back and start a civil war. When that didn't happen, he used the chance to convince Soundwave to get him back by trashing Shockwave in the process. That's the genius of Jazz, and why only he could have carried this mission. Prowl may be the master strategist, but Jazz is the improviser. He never waited for things to go his way, he just saw what was happening and took advantage of it best as he could.

## **Is this your first time to write Jazz and Soundwave?**

Yes, at least for any significant amount of time (they have small but fairly colorful cameos in *Die Mauer*). I hope the readers will forgive me for some slightly inconsistent development in their characters, especially Jazz. I started the story the way I'd expect to start any slave fic, with the slave terrified of physical contact and backing away at every opportunity, but as I got to know Jazz better and the way he works, I realized that isn't his style at all. He's much more likely to seize upon physical touch and take control of it, using it to distract the master and even wear him out. He did this to Skywarp for years. After he started applying the same strategy to Soundwave, Soundwave caught on fairly quickly and wouldn't let him get away with it - he only wanted Jazz to touch him

when he really meant it and not as part of his eternal act.

Writing this story was one big getting-to-know-you for me and Jazz, even after all the fics I've read that star him. The more I wrote him, the more I realized that there was just no trusting a character this slippery, and that nothing he said or did could be taken at face value. The idea that he was a compulsive liar grew and spread through the plot, because I realized Jazz felt safer when he was lying than when he stuck to truth. This way he could control conversations and the way people perceived him. Jazz is, in fact, quite a control freak, though not in the way we usually associate that word. He doesn't run around tidying things or micromanaging others' business, but he does seek to manipulate the people around him and arrange circumstances to his liking. This is all born out of the childhood trauma of growing up a slave, a helpless possession. He learned how to take control and made his escape, and for the rest of his life is determined to never be helpless again. No matter what it costs him or the others around him, he will figure out how to take control.

Soundwave I had a better grasp on, but even as I explored his character, I surprised myself with discoveries. The idea that he was steadfastly honest, for example, was a twist I'd never really planned on, I just threw it in there to highlight the contrast between himself and devious Jazz. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized it made perfect sense. What was Soundwave built to be? A carrier model, constructed to absorb all the data and footage from his cassettes, and then relay that information out into the world. Before the war, a suitable job would have probably been something like a news anchorman. If his whole purpose is built around gathering intel and then transmitting it to an audience, to lie would be an atrocious corruption of that task, something antithetical to his whole being. No wonder he can't stand the thought of it, and views those who do it regularly (Jazz, Starscream) with considerable contempt.

The loyalty thing, too, developed on its own. Of course we all know Soundwave is loyal to Megatron, that it's part of his standard characterization. But as for why, that it was something actually ingrained in his own programming, made total sense to me after I wrote it. These guys are designed to protect and nurture their baby cassettes come hell or high water, so the idea that they form a bond with someone and then turn their back is unthinkable. That the passing centuries had hardened this bond to Megatron into something almost physical made for the perfect excuse for Soundwave to keep following him, even after considerable ill treatment from Megatron. It also made the readers more sympathetic to him, which is a nice extra. To this day, I'm not particularly sure if Soundwave or Jazz is the protagonist in my story.

### **Don't forget the casseticons.**

Wouldn't dream of it. It was in fact stories about Soundwave and his cassette family that first drew me into the fandom to begin with; I loved reading homelife stories about the six of them (sometimes seven, with Ratbat) living together, sometimes a tiny oasis of family love within the hostile Decepticon army. It was fun to see otherwise scary Cons horsing around with each other and just being obnoxious siblings. What would it be like, I wondered, if an Autobot could see them like this? Would it help them to understand that not every Decepticon lives just to destroy? Of course, if an Autobot were there, the whole environment of the room would change too, altering their behavior. At first they would be suspicious and hostile to the Autobot. But if the Autobot were no threat, say, if he were their permanent prisoner, they might even grow to like him and include him in their fun. This hypothetical formed the basis of most of the cassettes' side of the plot, especially considering what they'd just been through with the cassetibots.

There aren't many Jazzwave stories out there, and even fewer full length ones. But I hadn't found a single one yet that really featured the cassettes as strongly as I thought they should have been,

because they are after all his babies and where goes Soundwave so do they. They're opinionated, loud-mouthed, strong willed, and every bit as determined to protect Soundwave as he is them, so I would expect to see them poking their noses into any romance he had going, demanding to be as much part of the story as he is. They also, of course, provide a huge wellspring of comic relief, between their antics with each other and the way their mischievous personalities bounce off straight-laced Soundwave. They are the sprinkle toppings to his vanilla ice cream, it is unthinkable to have Soundwave without them.

I was sometimes asked if I thought the cassettes really were like children, since I was obviously determined to write them that way. Maybe cassettes really are built with less advanced brains - after all, they're smaller and a lot of their resources are devoted to having the best sensory equipment of their species. Maybe certain cassettes just act like kids because they've figured out life is more fun that way and that certain enemies tend to underestimate them if they do. I think it's probably a middle ground, and each cassette settles where they do because it works for them. Jazz liked them a lot better than he ever expected to, and I think they were a big part of why he became more attached to Soundwave than he ever expected to - there are more kinds of love than just romantic love, and compared to his own warped childhood, that familial love turned out to be a pretty intoxicating drink.

### **What were your other favorite relationships to write?**

It's probably pretty obvious that I had a thing for writing Hook and First Aid, and Thundercracker and Fireflight. Partly that was inevitable, since Thundercracker and Hook were destined to play pretty big roles in the story, but partly it's because I thought they made such intriguingly good matches. Jazz and Soundwave were doomed to clash not just for reasons of being Autobot and Decepticon, but because they were so fundamentally different. Jazz was built to be an independent vehicle model, in need of nothing and no one. Soundwave was built to be a cassette carrier, designed to co-exist with a family, and not only that, designed to be its alpha member. These were all serious obstacles they had to overcome before the thought of a happy relationship was even conceivable.

Hook and Aid, though, were a match made in heaven. They're both from gestalts, so they both understand the deep connection between brothers and the need to be with them. (I have it in my head that Hook was VERY strict about Groove's scheduled maintenance, and would even call and harrass the cone trine to bring Groove in whenever he thought Aid needed some cheering up.)

They're both medics, and genuinely care about fixing and healing others when they're needed, no matter what the faction. And as Ratchet's student, Aid was already used to playing the 'assistant' role in the medbay, and used to being told what to do. The slavery was still wrong and still unwanted, but he could at least live a daily routine that wasn't too different from anything he'd have been doing for the Autobots anyway.

Fireflight would have also learned to get along fairly well with Thundercracker, I think. TC is not a gestalt mech, but he has been flying with a trine for a million years, so he understands the connection to one's team and the need to be with them. They're also both flying mechs, and he would understand how much Fireflight missed it. There wasn't anything he could do to fix it, but he could at least empathize - whereas Soundwave couldn't even understand Jazz's urge to get out and drive.

Since TC is usually written to be the decent one in Starscream's trine, I think he might have developed a real protective streak for this cute kid, and genuinely liked him. I definitely have a short one-shot in mind for them, have been bouncing it around in my head for ages, and need to get it down on paper.

I have also been requested to write a post TGWP fic for Starscream and Skyfire, which scares the willies out of me because I don't think I'm any good at writing Skyfire, but I will mull on it and see what I can do. Certainly they are an intriguing couple, and it's worth asking what's going to happen to them now that Megatron is no longer alive to pull Starscream in a dark direction.

### **Why ever did Megatron pick Bluestreak to be his slave?**

One of my most recurring questions for the entire life of this story. It's not a terribly exciting secret or anything, but I will write a one-shot to cover this one too.

### **How about non-relationship stuff?**

Almost as soon as I started writing, this so-called mindless pornfic started pushing its way to other territories. I had to wonder, what would a post-war Decepticon world look like? How would peacetime government work? What role would Earth play? How would the officers be expected to assist, and how long would it take before they were inevitably at each other's throats? Because c'mon, we all knew it had to happen right? As an American and avid student of its history, I happen to think my country's founding fathers were among the best men the Enlightenment had ever coughed into existence, but even such noble figures as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were still petty brats as soon as their common enemy was gone. I'd expect no better from the Decepticons.

And so I realized what Jazz's primary weapon would be, that his whole end game was nothing more than to turn them against each other and watch the empire implode. That led me into all sorts of political intrigue, the flames of which I fanned using some of my own personal economic biases. In case you couldn't tell from the story, I loathe occupational licensing and regulatory permits, both of which are statistically proven to raise prices and reduce job opportunities for minorities. If I wanted to demonstrate how a government was 'bad', that was the best way I could think of to do it. Sure, censorship is awful, but also too easy - all dystopian government stories have that. Doesn't really affect dinnertime either. I wanted to show how truly miserable it was trying to make a living in this world, that it's when people stop being able to put food in their own bellies that they get angry enough to put up a fight. So Shockwave strangled the economy by only permitting his own friends to run their businesses, which in turn gave incentive for unlicensed merchants to bribe the cops, who in turn were incentivized to take it because they weren't getting paid enough above the table.

It's not just realistic, it's actually the problem plaguing most suffering economies today. I also made sure to start things off at the top end of the slope, because I know how true it is that even the worst, most tyrannical leaders are usually swept into their top spot by virtue of their popularity (cough, current events). Megatron won his war and made himself a hero by dishing out energon in spades, but without a free economy, the fuel couldn't be allocated in the most efficient way and was either wasted or hoarded. A mech couldn't just go and 'get a job', when most of those jobs were permitted and unaffordable. Thank goodness for the black market, which gave opportunity outside of permits and allowed for the exchange of goods at their true value. As with any prohibition or red-taped market, the black market was the only thing keeping the city alive for a long time. So when Shockwave tried to stamp it out, he unwittingly caused a chain reaction that practically destroyed the city's economy. Google "libertarian", I am one.

### **What's your favorite part of the story?**

I went through ups and downs writing this eight-year long tale, and it would be a lie to say that there aren't some parts of it way more boring than others. Upon going through the AO3 upload process, I noticed that the story really doesn't even get started until Jazz learns the truth about the cassettibots in chapter 10; that's when he actually starts to take interest in Soundwave as a person rather than an obstacle, and the relationship really 'begins'. I'm amazed the readers were patient enough to wait so long. Because I approached writing TGWP more like it was a TV show instead of a novel, my muse was wandering all over the place, picking and choosing new ideas at random (hey, let's make it so Jazz used to be a slave! Hey, let's throw in Hot Rod and the other S3 cast for grins!). An editor would have no doubt been ruthless in their cuts if this were published.

I have many scenes that are dear to my heart, having slaved over their creation for so many years. I loved writing their trip to Earth and meeting the Stunticons, loved Jazz dancing for Soundwave in public, and I loved writing Drugged!Jazz and all his raunchy behaviors. But if I had to pick a whole section of the story, I'd probably have to say it was Jazz's confrontation with Megatron over the Autobot graffiti and the ensuing conflict between Jazz and Soundwave during his stay at the medbay. The question of whether it was morally 'right' for Jazz to defy Megatron in spite of the emotional cost to Soundwave was intriguing to me, and going by the review count intriguing for the readers too. Whole conversations were sparked in the original Livejournal thread, as readers debated whether Jazz had an obligation to be nice to Soundwave, who was keeping him prisoner. Doing it nicely, yes, but still keeping him prisoner. There is no right answer, so far as I'm concerned, but that the question was thought-provoking enough to spark such lively conversations made me really happy. And though Soundwave won that particular battle, I took extreme pleasure in wrapping up the whole arc with that little bomb of Jazz's lie about his past. It made for a great segue into the next arc, figuring out the secret to Jazz's origins. It's always so much fun to hit your characters with twists right when they think they have it all figured out.

### **Besides weird obsessions with economic laws, what was your greatest inspiration?**

The readers, of course. For 8 years I have struggled to get this thing written, and by some miracle all of you reading this now have stuck with me. Probably most of you haven't been around since the very beginning - even the girl who wrote the original challenge found Jesus and moved on. I've had longtime readers quit because they felt Jazz was being too nice to Soundwave. Some quit because they thought Soundwave was being too nice to Jazz. And some have moved on because, let's face it, 8 years is a freaking long time and some of us have things to do.

But no matter when or why someone left, or if they stayed, reader input was without question the single biggest inspiration for TGWP. I meant what I said about diving in without much of a plan, which meant my outline for the story was a blank canvas to be filled. When the readers responded with surges of happiness for cassette mischief, I responded by writing more cassette mischief. When you asked for more of Jazz and Soundwave teaming up to work together, I was able to give it. As the plot progressed and shaped itself, eventually there came a time when I had to stop catering to every request because there was no way I could fit it all in, but in the meantime I did as much as I could. I don't regret that or feel ashamed of it in any way; these stories are written for the reader's entertainment, and if readers want more of something why shouldn't they have it? It makes me really happy to know that I've written a thing that make other people happy, which in this moneyless world of fanfic is pretty much the best you can ask for in terms of job performance. A lot of people told me they read this in spite of having a strong distaste for slave fics, or distaste for the Jazzwave pairing, and that thrills me, because it means I was able to overcome those biases and still give a story they liked.

I think one girl also accused me of being too fat and ugly to be a stripper. So I'm not saying

everyone was an angel. But for the most part, I consider myself lucky to have known you all.

### **Talk a little about the music.**

The plot point of Jazz's music thoughts was, honestly speaking, nothing more than my own way of dealing with Soundwave's telepathy. How to cope with this amazing ability, in a way that was remotely believable? G1 had a bad habit of dropping these crazy powers on the board and then neglecting to ever use them, at least in the way I know I would if I could teleport or turn invisible or read thoughts. I can only remember Soundwave using the telepathy once in all the first two seasons.

The first step was to explore the limitations and boundaries that must exist, since he uses it so rarely. I used the Combaticons to show the specific situations Soundwave had to confine himself to, hence why he couldn't run around all day reading Jazz's thoughts on a constant ticker tape. All the rules arranged, I then took what seemed the most obvious course of resistance and used Jazz's deep fang geekiness for music to obscure his true 'thoughts'. I didn't know what the reader response would be and hadn't planned on using it again after that one full-length chapter spent on nothing else. The audience, though, went nuts for it and I was encouraged to send Soundwave back in, which I did, sometimes with Jazz's consent and sometimes not. Eventually this running plot thread led me to the story climax, when I realized that Jazz and Soundwave were never going to resolve their differences on their own - they kept speaking their own language to one another and never understanding a word of what the other said. They needed a mediator, a translator, and who better than the dearly departed Blaster? He was a mech with a foot in each of their worlds, and could bridge the gap between them.

I was asked to discuss at least a little of the music that played in Jazz's head, and thus helped to shape the tone of the story. Of course, the biggest hindrance of any book is that it can't convey music like a movie can, and knowing that, I strived to avoid relying on the significance of songs as best I could - this, for a character who literally defines his thoughts in music. Obviously an impossible task. But I do my best to avoid making the mistakes that I have seen other songfics make, such as italicizing song lyrics and setting them down in a poetic format apart from the rest of the narrative. As a longtime reader of fanfic, I already knew that nothing makes my eyes glaze over faster and jump to the bottom of the screen than seeing those darn italicized lyrics. There's just something about them that REPELS the desire to read.

So I decided to convert them to all capitals instead, which would set them apart from the narrative and also convey the sheer volume Soundwave was having to contend with. I also removed any punctuation, like excess commas, that only served to define one line from each other and stuck to the grammar that would have been used in ordinary English. Hopefully this made things more readable, though there was still nothing I could do about the significance of music if you were unfamiliar with the song. I tried to mix it up with songs that really mattered versus just describing a song being 'pretty' or 'sad', such that the readers could then substitute in their own favorite music. Because the way we relate to a song is personal anyway, as Jazz would say, and it doesn't do much good for me to write in a song that I connect to and has great meaning for ME, but leaves you cold.

That being said, I've been asked by multiple readers to supply a comprehensive playlist. Very well, your wish is my command. It's a long list of stuff that's both popular and obscure, stuff that's an amazingly close fit to the characters and stuff that's random but I just threw it anyway cuz I can. Jazz being the multicultural type that he is, of course he would have been playing lots of music in languages besides English, but since I wanted my readers to actually understand what he was listening to I had to keep to just a couple of those. It is, however, ALL over the place in terms of

genre, era, and style, since I wanted to demonstrate the breadth of his massive music archives as best I could. For years before writing Chapter 20 I worried and fretted that I'd never be able to come up with enough songs to give the chapter the length and density that I wanted - I scribbled notes down on the nearest paper whenever I heard a song on the radio I liked, keeping a running spreadsheet indexed by song and memory. I needn't have worried! Thanks to the astonishing range of music we humans have produced, the only real problem was trying to squeeze too much in and having to cut some.

Below is the list, broken down into the chapters and scenes in which they appeared. In most cases it's linked to a Youtube video that shows the lyrics, or at least when I could find them. There's too many to go into details for why it was picked in every case, but for those that were extra special to me or ones that I REALLY hope you'll go check out, I did.

### **On your mind:**

Still Unbroken, Lynyrd Skynyrd <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMfzZxIt9bA>. This one repeats no fewer than 3 times throughout the chapter, both opening and closing it. As a classic rock girl, I happen to think it's fantastic, and when you listen I'm sure you'll see why. There is just no way that someone who changes into a car as part of his core function would not want to race down a highway to this music.

California Dreamin', The Mamas and the Papas [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQ53\\_yJ7tKw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQ53_yJ7tKw)

Paint it Black, Rolling Stones <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4irXQhgMqg>

Head Games, Foreigner <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6N66I9mcG0>

Blowing in the Wind, Bob Dylan <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsjiSfAmEeo>

Beat It, Michael Jackson [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2PAkPp0\\_bY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2PAkPp0_bY)

Believe, the Bravery <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Z042y4DePw>

Diamond Dogs, David Bowie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOYiEWgUDVA>

O Come Emmanuel, Enya <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3M9JKmUecY>

Four Seasons, Vivaldi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRxofEmo3HA>. A few people noted the 'instrumental' music here and expressed curiosity. My initial thought was for Jazz to assign each of the 4 movements to the 4 top officers of the empire: Megatron is Winter, the coldest and most dangerous season. Shockwave, the one who helped usher in Megatron's rule, is Fall. Soundwave is Megatron's opposite, Summer. Starscream is Spring, because it was always Starscream Jazz was counting on to help bring Megatron down. It was only a vague idea I had at the time and I wound up not fleshing it out, but I still love Vivaldi.

Turn Turn Turn, the Byrds <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKP4cfU28vM>

Poker Face, Lady Gaga <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lCiZ8pMnLV4>

What do you want from me?, Monaco <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuoHfD4DkQw>

Phantom of the Opera, Andrew Lloyd Webber <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjRcLiupYAY>



Angry Johnny, Poe <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrygAv93Ick>

Head like a Hole, Nine Inch Nails <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw7UQwMu318>

Alejandro, Lady Gag <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNqIUb2RdGQ>

Through the Glass, Stone Sour <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFFubRzyMG8>

Disease, Matchbox Twenty <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNSOqSsqEcw>

Out of Touch, Hall and Oates <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6tUSo7BaDQ>

You may be Right, Billy Joel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ie5-LrulBGk>

Layla, Eric Clapton <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQ6m5dAef9o>

Hotel California, Eagles <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTU4YygWVsY>

Do you Hear the People Sing (French, in Jazz's mind), Les Miserables  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYb9sRLUDyM>

Come Sail Away, Styx <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TcztyNIFx0>

American Pie, Don Mclean <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAsV5-Hv-7U>

The Day that Never Comes, Metallica <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jc3XHsygifU>

Control, Poe <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWuPqD4s6Tw>

Man in the Mirror, Michael Jackson <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zqe5NP86OCc>

Il Mirto e la Rosa, Alessandro Safina <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CI2KjaDm0bU>. I am truly distressed that I couldn't find a video with English translations for these Italian lyrics, so I'll just quote a little right here: *And I will fly towards other horizons beyond the shadows of the mountains, where nobody will ever rise. I will walk along the streets of stone where the myrtle and the rose are bloomed for me as well. The clouds go by, winter will soon be over. I will blow away the dust and my heart will wake. I will feel in its beats that old song but never ended the echo of my life.*

Go Down Moses, Louis Armstrong <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vf6jBP4YXwo>

We Weren't Born to Follow, Bon Jovi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwNcFUAY60>

Wayward Son, Kansas <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3T7-VbfYLU>

St Elmo's Fire, John Parr <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oj5G7vhtjGk>

Nemzeti Dal, Ferenc, Kolcsey <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3YUfyrJdwo>. The Hungarian Anthem. It may not quite knock you off your feet the first time you hear it, but there is a powerful sad story behind its prominence in history, tied to the failed overthrow that Hungary pitched against the cruel Soviet occupation. Google Hungary October 23 if you want to learn more.

Tomorrow, Annie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIQ64ckJnLw>

Ain't Misbehavin', Billie Holiday <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R64FBzsVsYg>

Bent, Matchbox Twenty <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1NgpOOQjvEI>

Haunted, Poe <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSbHvOxrEy8>

November Rain, Guns n Roses <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDLrrwWxejM>

Epiphany, Transiberian Orchestra <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjFTpBH56WM>

Prove it all Night, Springsteen <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgdA4wv7INA>

Still Unbroken, Lynyrd Skynyrd <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMfzZxIt9bA>

### **On defiance:**

King Nothing, Metallica <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gSb2A4mXtg>. When Megatron discovers the Autobot graffiti, and Soundwave tries to clear his name by taking a quick trip into Jazz's head. He hears this instead, which is Jazz gloating that Megatron is gradually finding he has become king of "nothing", an empire beginning to fall apart.

### **On laughter:**

Tomorrow, as performed by the Muppets <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEilPR1PXko>. When Jazz tries to sing a silly nonsense song in order to make Soundwave laugh. Okay, I am a hardcore Muppets fan and love them beyond measure - check this video out if you need to grin.

House of Broken Love, Great White <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmNdBAnYbYM>. The song Jazz chooses to dance to when Soundwave takes him out into the unrepaired sectors and requests that he really dance for him for the first time. The lyrics could not be more perfect to their situation, and Jazz was really trying to get a message across to Soundwave by using them - a message that of course Soundwave could not or would not hear.

### **On the floor:**

I am your Skin, Bravery <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=No65hXAJ2Xk>. Listen if for no other reason than to get the cool danceclub vibe that Jazz was enjoying when Soundwave took him out on the town and let him dance in public. While it's true Jazz's every move was calculated to either seduce or distract Soundwave, there were certain times when it was barely an act, and this is one of those times. When Jazz invited him to his head, it was a genuine invitation, he wanted Soundwave to enjoy this the way he could.

### **On a mission:**

Euphoria, Delerium <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8P1z2tHCTEU>. The song Jazz was dancing to when surrounded by fireflies, doesn't need much explanation.

Searching, Joe Satriani <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f4O-0BH8kc>. The music that Jazz spontaneously started playing out loud during their first interface, out in the jungle. It is purely instrumental, I picked it to evoke the emotions of the moment and nothing more, and any reader is invited to pick their own meaningful music for the same effect. But if you're curious what I was

hearing in my head, this is it.

### **On the aftermath:**

Welcome to the Jungle, Guns n'Roses <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICxn0KVl03Q>. The music playing in Jazz's head during the fight with the Insecticons; again needs no explanation.

Thunderstruck, AC/DC <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SoXxn1CUqk>. Ditto.

Gimme Shelter, Rolling Stones <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbmS3tQJ7Os>. Jazz was dealing with some scary thoughts as he scrambled through the jungle to find Laserbeak, and never mind that he already knew exactly what happened to her. What he was a lot more worried about was the realization that he'd just saved Soundwave's life instinctively, that he'd have done it whether he needed Soundwave for his plans or not. That he had started to feel 'real' feelings for Soundwave terrified him, and so pleading for shelter from the "storm" was as much about that dilemma as it was the actual storm.

### **On dangerous ground:**

In the air tonight, Phil Collins <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ9tQL0GoZc>. The music Jazz chose to dance for when Megatron commanded a display. I picked it because it's very haunting and creepy, full of foreboding for something bad is about to happen.

### **On revelations:**

Feeling Good, Michael Buble <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ehm4HLnr-FQ>. You absolutely MUST listen to this to get a taste of Jazz's delighted anticipation. Soundwave has just fainted and is accidentally tapping into Jazz's thoughts from a fair distance, and even though Jazz is physically lying like a broken heap in Megatron's bedroom, in his mind he is dancing with pure joy. He knows that he is on the threshold of breaking out tonight, and can't wait.

### **On point:**

Sabotage the System, The New Deal <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kbAQNZEFR0>. Could we have a more perfect theme song for Jazz than something titled "Sabotage the System"? This is what he was listening to as he started breaking into the vault under Megatron's headquarters, right before Soundwave catches him in the act.

### **On resurrection:**

Searching, Joe Satriani <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f4O-0BH8kc>. Jazz's special "first time" music he was playing in the jungle, played again here by Soundwave is in his dastardly counterattack.

## On the edge:

Boys are Back in Town, Thin Lizzy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzDPGDGDgrE>. When Jazz and Blaster reunite.

Far Cry, Rush <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGq4J4laydk>. As Jazz recounts how the escape was going so well, until he slipped and fell into Megatron's crosshairs.

Dancing in the Dark, Springsteen <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1nHL8TSr5I>. An American classic, if you don't already know it.

Terrible Thought, Poe [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohK\\_c1cVs9k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohK_c1cVs9k). Observant readers may note that I use a LOT of Poe for Jazz; I can't help it that her lyrics are just so darn expressive! In this case it's extremely literal, the lyrics say "I don't want you in my mind, you're breaking my stride!" At this point Jazz is thoroughly fed up with Soundwave and wants him gone, out of his head.

Take me Home Tonight, Eddie Money <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrTDa3XTUxw>. Another classic, which is playing in Jazz's mind while he verbally recounts to Blaster what the original breakout plan was supposed to be. Blaster used it to translate what Jazz was leaving out, that he wanted 'take Soundwave home tonight', aka take Soundwave along with him when he left the planet.

Oh What a Night, the Four Seasons <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Rqx14kkpK0>. A song about someone becoming transfixed by a romance when out on the town, which Blaster correctly interprets meant Jazz and Soundwave's very emotional conversation at Shockwave's party.

Master of Puppets, Metallica <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJspTQOh9To>. Megatron, of course.

The Real Folk Blues, Cowboy Bebop <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLzpXciiiA>. Anime fans will instantly recognize the ending theme to Cowboy Bebop, which not only has a sultry jazzy tone that Jazz would love, but expresses the pain of loving someone when they've just betrayed you.

What Child is this, Transiberian Orchestra <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivlv4J5uiag>. I'm a TSO lover through and through, and I can't help that Hasbro started all this Jesus imagery when they wrote Optimus and Hot Rod. So Christmas music was a natural choice whenever Rodimus comes up.

I am a Rock, Paul Simon <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKY-smJ6aBQ>. I'd say the lyrics are pretty self explanatory to Jazz's situation.

I'll be Watching You, Police [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TH\\_YbBHVF4g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TH_YbBHVF4g). Practically everyone who ever suggested music for this story brought this one up; it could be Soundwave's personal theme. Jazz doesn't have to play more than one line of it before Blaster knows exactly who he means and why.

There were a couple of moments here when 'new music' starts playing that Soundwave doesn't understand, and I have no idea what they are. Since the point was that Soundwave couldn't possibly hope to understand what Jazz was thinking at that time, I didn't worry about picking one and dropping in lyrics so that the audience could be in on the secret; I wanted them to be as clueless as Soundwave in this moment. I was building, I hope, suspense for what Jazz's decision would be.

Love Walks In, Van Halen <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TV85csKp5w>. I had this song picked out for a long time, and it was for that reason that I hinted years ago that Van Halen was

Blaster's personal favorite band. It's all about the happy - if startling - realization that you're in love with someone, and there just isn't much else to be done about it. Jazz lets himself come to this realization and plays the song, not just to announce his thoughts but because he knows Blaster loves the song and it is like his own personal thank you to Blaster for not giving up on him.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!